



*Wilhelm Kempf*

## **Peace Journalism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the German press and the German public<sup>1</sup>**

*Abstract:* The present paper discusses the potentials and limitations of Peace Journalism (PJ) and exemplifies them with the results of (1) a recent survey of the mental models (individual frames) according to which Germans interpret the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, (2) a comparative analysis of the German press coverage of the second Intifada and the Gaza War, and (3) an experimental study on how the German public copes with the frames that are offered by the media.

According to the author's understanding, PJ is *not* a variant of advocacy journalism, but a means to fulfil the quality norms of journalism in cases of conflict and crisis. Most journalists try to do their best to produce quality journalism. Since they share the same beliefs as the rest of society, however, in an antagonistic situation they often end up with one-sided coverage that does not live up to these norms. The only way out of this dilemma is to learn to accept facts before they are interpreted. Accordingly, the first rule for journalists who aim to facilitate such a process of social learning is to mistrust the plausible, and the second rule is, to ask the right questions.

In order to accomplish this, journalists need to refrain from the media's focus on negative news, they need to refrain from a superficial balancing of their reports, and they need to avoid over-simplification. If they succeed, they will find an audience that appreciates their coverage as less biased than conventional war reporting. If news recipients already side with one party or the other, however, they may reject PJ as biased in favor of the opposing party. Nonetheless, in the long-run PJ may contribute to a society's co-construction of reality in a more beneficial and productive way.

### **1. Definitions of Peace Journalism**

There's a war between the ones who say there is a war  
and the ones who say there isn't.  
(Leonard Cohen, There is a War)

Media contribute to the social construction of reality, on one hand, by introducing specific topics into public discourse (agenda setting; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and, on another, by presenting these topics (framing; Goffman, 1974) in such a way "as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993).

Similarly, Jake Lynch & Annabel McGoldrick (2005) provided a compact formula for what Peace Journalism (PJ) is about when they defined it as follows:

Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report, and how to report them – which create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict.

As a formula for the aims of PJ, this definition is quite comprehensible. As a working definition, however, it lacks precision and can easily be (mis)understood as a program of advocacy journalism that requires active contributions by reporters to peaceful conflict resolution (Loyn, 2008) and entails overstepping the thin line between journalism and public relations (Hanitzsch, 2008).

As a consequence, (if not war) at least antagonism has broken out between those who support the PJ concept and those who do not. Many journalists, such as David Loyn, fear that PJ could compromise their integrity and their role as neutral disseminators of information, and they feel they are under attack when "the advocates of Peace Journalism ... lump everyone else together ... as 'War Journalists'" (Loyn, 2008, 61).

When Annabel McGoldrick (2008) launched her attack on journalistic objectivity, the situation worsened. Critics of PJ refused to give up the quality norms of journalism and accused PJ of being the opposite of good journalism (Loyn, 2008).

Understanding myself as one of the pioneers of PJ,<sup>2</sup> I must admit that they are not completely wrong: If PJ understands itself as an advocacy journalism that disregards journalistic quality norms, it is in danger of not only deteriorating into the opposite of good journalism, but also of jeopardizing its own goals and becoming a Journalism of Attachment.

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<sup>2</sup> The first version of my PJ model (Kempf, 1996, 2008) was published two years prior to Galtung's (1998, 2008).

Partisanship in the name of peace, creating one's own conflict resolution plan and designating an evildoer who is allegedly to blame for not adopting this plan – these can easily promote enemy images and partisanship for those regarded as the victims of the evildoers. Accordingly, it was no surprise when one of the most popular advocates of PJ posted a couple of anti-Israeli blogs during the Gaza War.

## 2. The need for Peace Journalism

All we are saying is give peace a chance.  
(John Lennon, Give Peace a Chance)

In order to avoid these dangers, I propose that we modify Lynch & McGoldrick's definition as follows:

Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters are aware of their contribution to the construction of reality and of their responsibility to "give peace a chance."

Even if we adopt this definition, however, the critics of PJ may still cling to the view that PJ is at best meaningless (Loyn, 2008), or perhaps just old wine in new bottles (Hanitzsch, 2008), and they may still deny the need for PJ, "since most of the legal framework, and the codes of conduct for journalists, written by trade unions and responsible employers, provide a sufficient framework which prescribes what journalists can do and what they cannot do" (Loyn, 2008).

Regarding this point, however, they are definitely wrong. The codes of conduct for journalists are definitely not sufficient to guarantee high quality journalism that is neutral, objective and unbiased.

1. As countless media content analyses have demonstrated, the mainstream of war reporting has an escalation-prone bias, and so-called quality journalism does not live up to its own norms.
2. Even though most journalists try to do a good job, they often fail and end up doing biased reporting and – in the worst case – a sort of conflict coverage which looks like war propaganda plain and simple.

Journalists don't just report facts, they also give them meaning. And even if they try to report truthfully, they can only write what they personally believe to be true. However, journalists are members of society, and they often share the same beliefs as other members of their society.

Particularly in long-lasting intractable conflict, however, these societal beliefs include, among others, beliefs about the justness of one's cause, one's victim role, the delegitimizing of the enemy and the defense of personal and national security through a policy of strength. According to Bar-Tal (1996), it can be assumed that these societal beliefs can be found in any society engaged in intractable conflict, especially in those that successfully cope with it. They are necessary for enduring intractable conflict, and any nation at war, therefore, tries to create and maintain these beliefs by means of propaganda.

Nonetheless, they are not just an ideology imposed on society from outside or by its political leaders, nor are they just the result of misleading propaganda. They arise from a long history of experiences with concrete conflicts at a high level of escalation, and they are constituted as a generalized interpretation of these conflicts. Once these beliefs have emerged in a society, they provide a framework (war frame) that literally interprets every interaction with the opponent as another event in the great historical drama of the struggle between "good" and "evil."

In order to give peace a chance, journalists need to distance themselves from these beliefs and replace them with a different interpretative frame (peace frame) that acknowledges the justification (of at least some) of the interests of the other side, recognizes mutual victim roles, ends the delegitimizing of the opponent and strives to achieve personal and national security through a peaceful solution (Kempf, 2011).

## 3. How Germans frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

He's the Universal Soldier and he really is to blame,  
his orders come from far away no more,  
they come from here and there and you and me.  
(Buffy St. Marie, Universal Soldier)

The escalation dynamics of conflicts are decisively influenced by whether a conflict is interpreted as a competitive or as a cooperative process. Competitive conflicts have a tendency to expand and escalate and go together with typical misperceptions (Deutsch, 1973) that become motors of conflict escalation and – in the long-run (Kempf, 2003) – solidify into the above-named societal beliefs.

The members of a society directly affected by a conflict are not the only ones who develop such beliefs. Outsiders trying to make sense of a conflict in which they are not themselves engaged will also interpret it either in the sense of a peace frame (win-win model) or of a war frame (win-lose model). How a person positions himself

toward a conflict – which side he takes, e.g., in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – thus depends essentially on the mental model he forms of the conflict.

Particularly in Germany, the way people position themselves toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is quite ambivalent, however. The World War II lesson of “never again fascism, never again war” implies a tendency to adopt the Peace Frame (never again war). But, it is ambivalent with regard to human rights. “Never again fascism” can be interpreted in two ways:

1. as support for the *victims of National Socialism*, which implies a tendency toward unconditional solidarity with Israeli policy and a weakening of the peace frame. This can go so far that it turns into a war frame: (never again fascism, *therefore* war), as was the case (in part) in 1990/91 Gulf War discourse (Kempf, 1994), or
2. as support for *human rights worldwide*, which implies rejecting at least some aspects of Israeli policy and includes solidarity with the Israeli peace movement and at least a certain degree of empathy with the Palestinian side. Although this tends to strengthen the peace frame, it also poses the danger of adopting the war frame and siding with the Palestinians.

The results of a recent survey (Kempf, 2011) demonstrate that this danger is quite real. One of the aims of the survey was to reconstruct the mental models according to which people in Germany interpret the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Starting from the conception that mental models have not only a cognitive, but also an affective aspect, we designed three separate scales for participants’ “concern about the conflict,” their perception of the “ambivalence of war and peace” for both Israelis and Palestinians, and their “positioning with regard to the conflict.” As a first step, we identified typical response patterns for each of the three scales, and in a second step, we then inferred the participants’ mental models by identifying the meta-patterns in which they combine concern, ambivalence and positioning.

*Concern:* The results of the survey showed that the more they are concerned, the better the participants consider their knowledge of the conflict to be. The more participants feel affected by the conflict, the fewer there are who do not feel attached to one side or the other, the more there are who have visited Israel and/or the Palestinian territories, the more there are who have had personal contact with Israelis and/or Palestinians, and the more there are who have Israeli and/or Palestinian friends, relatives or acquaintances.

*Ambivalence:* With increasing concern, participants’ sensitivity for the ambivalence of war and peace changes from empathy for Israel’s security dilemma via uncertainty about whether peace can offer Israel security, to recognizing the ambivalence of peace for both parties, to regarding the status quo as the lesser evil for Israel, to naive pacifism: “peace is good, war is evil,” and finally to uncertainty as to whether war is really very bad for the Palestinians.

*Positioning:* At the same time, the dominant position participants take to the conflict shifts from no position at all via an ambivalent peace frame with sympathy for Israel to an ambivalent peace frame with sympathy for the Palestinians, to a polarization between a pro-Israeli war frame, pro-Palestinian peace frame and a pro-Palestinian war frame.

From this point on, the participants’ positions switch to the Palestinian side: The (mainly) naive pacifists interpret the conflict according to a pro-Palestinian peace frame on the edge of a war frame, and the participants who are most concerned about the conflict and – at the same time – do not fear that Palestinian violence is an obstacle to the establishment of a Palestinian state interpret the conflict according to a pro-Palestinian war frame.

Comparing the results of our representative study with those of a (non-representative) pilot study, we also found that there was a dramatic shift in the way participants position themselves to the conflict. From one year after the Gaza war (November 2009 – February 2010), when the data for the pilot study were collected, to the months after the Israeli navy’s seizure of the Free Gaza ship (June 2010 – November 2010), when the data for the survey were collected, the share of participants who interpreted the conflict according to a pro-Palestinian peace frame decreased dramatically, and instead there arose a group of participants who interpreted the conflict according to a pro-Palestinian war frame. In our pilot study, we did not find any such group.

#### 4. How to do Peace Journalism

And brothers can't you see,  
this is not the way we put the end to war.  
(Buffy St. Marie, Universal Soldier)

If journalists are to give peace a chance, they need some easy-to-follow guidelines for how to do this, and for many journalists and peace researchers, Galtung’s (1998, 2002) famous table which contrasts PJ with conventional war journalism seems to offer such a guideline. As a guideline, however, it has some crucial shortcomings:

1. It creates a simple dualism between PJ, on the one hand, and War Journalism, on the other.
2. It only describes the outcome of the two approaches.
3. It does not tell us *how* to reach our goal.

Both the antagonism between those who subscribe to PJ and those who do not, and the tendency to understand PJ as a variant of advocacy journalism that deliberately disregards the norms of quality journalism are simply logical consequences of these shortcomings.

PJ should be employed, but it is not helpful to expect journalists to distance themselves from the dominant beliefs of their society. Societal beliefs are part of a society's ethos, and they are also part of the psychological infrastructure that enables societal members to hold up under the stress of war (Bar-Tal, 1996). They construct society members' views of conflict in a way that seemingly proves the truth of the stereotypes and prejudices that foster these views (Kempf, 2003), and the only way to break out of this vicious circle is to learn to accept the facts before they are interpreted (Martin-Baró, 1991).

Only if a society does this can conflicts that persist after a peace treaty or that arise during peace processes be understood in a way that gradually overcomes prejudices and transforms a war culture into a more constructive social contract between former enemies.

- The first rule for journalists who aim to facilitate such a process of social learning, therefore, is to *mistrust the superficially plausible*.
- And the second rule is to *ask the right questions*.

A peace or reconciliation discourse is *not* a discourse *about* peace or reconciliation, and especially not a discourse that harmonizes contradictions or suppresses conflicts. It is a matter of *how* to deal with conflict. Correspondingly, the best way to characterize the various discourse forms in which journalists may engage is in terms of the questions they focus on.

- In *war discourse*, it is a matter of "Who is guilty?" and "How can they be stopped?"
- *Peace discourse* asks, "What is the problem?" and "How can it be solved?"
- And when a *reconciliation discourse* is appropriate, the focus is on questions such as "Who is the other?" and "How can we meet each other with mutual respect?"

The choice of a suitable discourse form is essential for the developmental dynamics of peace processes, and – as Lea Mandelzis (2007) has shown in the case of the Oslo Process – mistakes in choosing a discourse form can easily create overly optimistic expectations. Their disappointment can spread ill-feeling in the population and ultimately has the consequence that the discourse turns into a renewed war discourse.

For this very reason, it would be inappropriate to engage in a reconciliation discourse during the 'hot' phase of a conflict. If journalists manage to maintain a critical distance from belligerents of every stripe and make the public aware of the high price violent conflict imposes on all participants, they have already accomplished a lot. Proposals for solutions are a delicate matter at this stage of a conflict, however, and there is a risk that societal members will rashly dismiss coverage as implausible or as hostile counter-propaganda. Therefore, in this phase the chief aim can only be to find a way out of the fixation on violence and mutual destruction and to alert the public to an external viewpoint that can deconstruct the conflict parties' antagonistic conceptions of reality.

Once this is accomplished and the parties no longer automatically perceive every voice for moderation as hostile, PJ may enter into a constructive process and focus coverage on the question of how to start peace processes and how to build peace.

## 5. How the German quality press frames the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

And he knows he shouldn't kill,  
and he knows he always will.  
(Buffy St. Marie, Universal Soldier)

In every escalating conflict, there comes a point when the parties start to seek allies and to divide the world into those who are "for us" and those who are "against us." PJ doesn't have any easy solutions for such situations. Quality journalism cannot refrain from reporting issues that are unfavorable to one party or the other and, in the light of increasing sympathy for the Palestinian cause in the German public, it is not surprising that German media are often accused of providing one-sided reportage on the Middle East conflict and displaying narrow partisanship for the Palestinian position (cf. Anti-Defamation League, 2002; Jäger & Jäger, 2003; Wistrich, 2004; Krämer, 2010).

Criticism like this should not be taken lightly. In order to decide whether there is a growing pro-Palestinian bias in the German media, we compared the coverage of the second Intifada and the Gaza War in the big five German national quality papers which cover the entire political spectrum and are generally regarded as representative for the German media landscape (cf. Wilke, 1999): *Die Welt* (DW), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) and *Die Tageszeitung* (taz).

The results of our study (cf. Maurer & Kempf, 2011) demonstrated that media coverage of both conflicts was much more complex and differentiated than assumed by critics, and during the Gaza War the German quality press likewise did its best to avoid taking the Palestinian side.

The press tried hard to satisfy the quality norms of journalism and to report in an objective and detached manner. In many regards, it maintained a uniform distance from both conflict parties, it was quite critical of both sides' policies, and it tried to make clear the pluralism of both societies.

Nonetheless, the coverage of the two wars did not really live up to PJ as defined above, and the results of our study showed the negative impact of the news selection mechanisms that Galtung blamed for the escalation-prone bias of conventional war journalism as early as 1998.

1. Due to the news factor "social, cultural, historical proximity," more was reported on the Israelis than on the Palestinians. Only with regard to victims (and due to the actual number of victims) did the German papers report less about Israel than about the Palestinians.
2. Due to the news factor "negativism," German coverage was dominated by negative news. It focused on the employment of force, the victims of violence, as well as on the conflict parties' confrontational and threatening behavior and thus put not only the Palestinians, but also Israel in a bad light.

In this context, Israeli actions were more often criticized than those of the Palestinians. Israel's strength and confidence of victory, competitive logic, its confrontational behavior and threats to it were more often reported than on the Palestinian side. This makes Israel appear extremely powerful and uncompromising and could possibly favor a "David versus Goliath" image that encourages solidarity with the Palestinians.

Trying to provide balanced reportage, however, the German media neutralized this negative effect by displaying a measure of understanding for Israeli policies, so that on balance Israel came off looking better than the Palestinians.

1. Israel was more frequently portrayed in a defensive position than were the Palestinians, and the threat to Israel was more often thematized.
2. Israeli actions were more often justified, Israel's rights were more often acknowledged, and not only Israel's cooperative behavior, but also its readiness for cooperation were thematized more often.

Due to the different nature of the two wars, during the Gaza War the reportage situation tended to shift in favor of the Palestinians, however.

1. There were more frequent reports on threats to the Palestinians and on Palestinian victims than during the second Intifada, and the calculation and comparison of victim statistics was more frequent.
2. Cooperative behavior, offers of cooperation and threatening behavior were less often thematized for both sides, and the focus of the reportage shifted to Israeli use of force, on the one side, and confrontational Palestinian (political) measures, on the other.
3. While the focus on Palestinian use of force declined during the Gaza War in favor of a competitive logic and confrontational behavior, during the Gaza War Israeli use of force was focused on about twice as often as during the second Intifada. Thereby an impression was given of an increasing asymmetry between Israel's (excessive) use of force and the Palestinian's (mere) political confrontation.

Thus, the media image of Israeli actions during the Gaza War was more negative than during the second Intifada, and that of Palestinian actions, in contrast, not quite as negative as previously. This partial leveling of the differences between the representations of the two parties' actions was, however, probably due more to the facts and the specific characteristics of the two wars than to bias in favor of the Palestinians.

Quite to the contrary, differences in German reportage on the two wars indicate a clear tendency to tone down a reporting situation unfavorable to Israel.

1. Also, during the Gaza War, Israel's behavior was still less negatively represented than that of the Palestinians.
2. Israel's seemingly excessive use of force was balanced with reportage that justified Israeli actions, increasingly represented Israel as taking a defensive position and less often thematized Israel's superior military power.

3. To be sure, the frequency of justifications of *both* conflict parties' actions decreased during the Gaza War, but the judgment of Israeli intentions and actions did not change in comparison with the second Intifada and also remained largely positive during the Gaza War.
4. Instead, reportage on events that could turn readers against Israel was counteracted by a negative shift in the evaluation of Palestinian intentions and actions.
5. Thereby the imbalance between the two parties increased in favor of Israel. Whereas during the second Intifada Israeli behavior was justified somewhat more than twice as often, during the Gaza War this rose to four-and-a-half times as often.

This asymmetry between increased portrayal of Israeli use of force, on the one side, and increased justification of Israeli actions, on the other, is also mirrored in the punctuation of the conflict and the representation of its victims.

1. Thus, during the Gaza War reportage on victims and numbers of victims admittedly shifted in favor of the Palestinians, but this was counteracted in that Israel (relative to the Palestinians) was increasingly represented in a defensive position, and Israel's superior military force was (relatively) less often thematized.
2. Although the amount of coverage devoted to the two sides was not as dramatically unequal as during the second Intifada, during the Gaza War the threat to Israel was still represented more than twice as frequently as that to the Palestinians.
3. And although both parties were less often represented in a defensive position during the Gaza War, the ratio between the two parties shifted in favor of Israel. While Israel was represented twice as often in a defensive position during the second Intifada, this rose to more than three times as often during the Gaza War.

Summarizing these results, we can state that the coverage of the German quality press did not meet the standards of PJ.

1. While the press aimed at objective, detached and balanced coverage, it tended to follow the pattern of conventional war reporting (cf. focus on violence and confrontational behavior), which did not really give peace a chance but merely put both sides in a bad light.
2. Moreover, the particular way the press tried to balance coverage during the Gaza War produced a tension between a reportage situation that could favor pro-Palestinian solidarity among readers, on the one side, and a framing of the reportage that was favorable to Israel, on the other.

On the background of German-Jewish history and precaution against the rise of a "new" Israel-centered anti-Semitism, this way of "balancing" is quite understandable. But it may also provoke a backlash and even make existing latent anti-Semitic prejudices and stereotypes salient: Prejudices from the repertoire of *latent* anti-Semitism – e.g., "One [i.e., the German press] is not allowed to say what one really thinks about the Jews." – or insinuations from the repertoire of *manifest* anti-Semitism – e.g., "International Jewry has a firm grip on the German press and dictates how it has to report."

## 6. How the German public copes with media frames

You don't believe in war,  
but what's that gun you're totin'?'  
(P.F. Sloan, *Eve of Destruction*)

According to the present state of framing research, media frames do not have a linear effect on public opinion. The effects of framing result more from the interaction between media frames and the a priori mental models (individual frames) with which people make sense of the issues covered by the media. Depending on the recipients' mental models, partisan war journalism may also produce a backlash, and consequently we should not be overly optimistic about the potentially positive effects of PJ.

In a recent experiment (cf. Kempf & Thiel, forthcoming) we confronted the participants in six experimental groups with differently framed reports on either Israeli or Palestinian violence: A Palestinian suicide attack in Tel Aviv in April 2006 and an Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip at the end of February and beginning of March 2008.

Using original material from the German quality press and based on Kempf's (2003) model of escalation- vs. de-escalation oriented conflict coverage, each of these scenarios was framed either

- according to an escalation oriented pro-Israeli war frame which condemns Palestinian violence and/or justifies Israeli actions, or

- according to an escalation oriented pro-Palestinian war frame which condemns Israeli violence and/or justifies Palestinian actions,
- or according to a de-escalation oriented peace frame which focuses on the costs of war for both sides.

In accordance with previous studies (cf. Bläsi et al., 2005; Spohrs, 2006; Schäfer, 2006; Möckel, 2007), the results of the experiment were quite encouraging for PJ. The participants generally evaluated the peace frames as more understandable, less biased, more balanced and more impartial.

Nonetheless, these effects were not uniform.

1. Due to their sensitivity to the propaganda function of reports about violence and victims (cf. Herman & Chomsky, 1988), participants who positioned themselves according to a pro-Palestinian war frame (or on the edge of one) rejected reports about Palestinian violence as biased in favor of Israel, and conversely, those who interpreted the conflict according to a pro-Israeli war frame rejected reports about Israeli violence as biased in favor of the Palestinians.
2. As well, participants dismissed media frames that were incompatible with their own positioning to the conflict as less understandable, more biased and partisan in favor of the opposing side.
3. Moreover, even participants who themselves interpret the conflict according to a peace frame projected the Israel-friendly bias of German mainstream coverage onto the media peace frame and regarded it as somewhat biased in favor of Israel.

## 7. Summary

Summarizing both the theoretical considerations and the empirical studies that I have presented in this paper, I conclude that the norms of quality journalism are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the production of quality journalism during conflicts and crises. In order to give peace a chance,

1. journalists need to refrain from the media's focus on negative news
2. they need to refrain from a superficial balancing of their reports, and
3. they need to mistrust the superficially plausible, refrain from oversimplification and ask the right questions.

If they succeed, they will find an audience that appreciates their coverage as more understandable and less biased, more impartial and more balanced than conventional war reporting.

Nonetheless, we should not be over-optimistic about the beneficial effects of PJ. In an antagonistic situation where society members have already made up their minds as to who is good and who is bad, journalists must be aware that news recipients who already side with one party or the other may reject the peace frame as less understandable and more biased in favor of the opposing party.

Moreover, in an antagonistic situation like this, PJ risks coming under fire from belligerents on all sides and, therefore, requires great courage on the side of journalists. Nonetheless, PJ is a worthwhile endeavor, and in the long-run it may contribute to a society's co-construction of reality in a more beneficial and productive way.

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