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Where I stand on peace journalism and the academic boycott of Israel

Kurzfassung: In Antwort auf Kempf's (2016) Essay über "Gefahren des Friedensjournalismus" legt der Autor dar, dass Friedensjournalismus stets als ein Weg zur Erfüllung der journalistischen Aufgabe einer tatsächengetreuen Berichterstattung verfochten wurde, und bestreitet, dass er gleichbedeutend mit der Forderung nach irgendeiner Form von Meinungsjournalismus und/oder Aktivismus sei. Akademiker, die von der palästinensischen Zivilgesellschaft aufgefordert sind, institutionelle Verbindungen mit dem israelischen Hochschulsystem zu boykottieren, befinden sich dagegen in einer anderen Situation. Sie stehen vor der Wahl, entweder an diesen Verbindungen zu teilzuhaben und damit unbeabsichtigt zu Komplizen der israelischen Besatzungspolitik zu werden, oder sich dem Boykott anzuschließen, der als eine Form der Druckausübung auf Israel zu verstehen ist, die Verletzung internationaler Menschenrechte zu beenden und einen gerechten Frieden mit den Palästinensern auszuhandeln.

Abstract: In reply to Kempf's (2016) essay on "Dangers of peace journalism" the author argues that peace journalism has always been advocated as a way to implement the journalistic remit of factual reporting, and refutes the claim that it is tantamount to a call for journalism to act as any form of advocacy. Academic researchers who are the subject of a call by Palestinian civil society to boycott institutional links with Israeli higher education are in a different situation, however. They face a choice, either to participate in these links, and therefore become inadvertently complicit in the occupation of Palestinian territory, or to join the boycott which should be seen as a source of external pressure on Israel to cease its violations of international humanitarian law, and negotiate a just peace with the Palestinians.

I am not unique, but certainly unusual among peace journalism researchers in having enjoyed a long and successful career in professional journalism before taking up an academic post. That experience, culminating in a role as an on-screen presenter of BBC World Television News, instilled in me a healthy respect for the social function of journalism in enabling its publics to distinguish facts from claims.

That is why, when Annabel McGoldrick and I came to devise a catch-all definition of peace journalism for our book of the same name (2005), we came up with the following formula:

"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 value nonviolent responses" (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005: 5).

This does not, as Kempf (2016) states, mean peace journalism can or should be seen a form of peace advocacy. In case there should be any room for doubt about this, we went on, a few pages later, to pose the question – and answer it – in explicit terms:

"Does Peace Journalism mean journalists... becoming advocates for particular solutions or initiatives? Hint: 'NO!'" (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005: 18).

In a later text, I further argue:

"Peace Journalism is an advocacy position vis-à-vis journalism itself, but *it is not trying to turn journalism into something else*. If 'society at large' is provided with such opportunities, but chooses not to take them, then there is nothing else journalism can do about it, while remaining journalism. On the other hand, there is no concomitant commitment to ensuring that violent responses get a fair hearing. They can take care of themselves, because the reporting conventions (still) dominant in most places, most of the time, ensure that they seldom struggle for a place on the agenda" (Lynch, 2008: 3-4; emphasis in the original).

To return to my opening observation, the remit of journalism to report facts remains salient, and important. The immersion of peace journalism in the critical discourse of research scholarship, commonly with an orientation to communication or other social sciences, problematises this formula, however. It seems to rest on a correspondence theory of representation, which is difficult to justify in the context of dominant concepts in such scholarship, attentive to variants of social constructivism.

That is why I have revisited this very issue in my more recent work, *A Global Standard for Reporting Conflict* (Lynch, 2014), developing an argument – with reference to Jürgen Habermas' concepts of the public sphere, and critical rational debate – in favour of socially constructed facts. If the world cannot be accessed as it is, then it can be assembled as agreed – at least in cases where an overwhelming weight of evidence has been processed by credentialled opinion, and with the caveat that agreement requires constant criticism and review, if it is to be regarded as reliable.

One important example of a socially constructed fact is the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Journalism should not treat human-induced global warming as merely one side of an argument, demanding to be 'balanced' by a countervailing, equally credible view. Another is the consensus of international legal opinion encapsulated in the phrase, "Israel's military occupation of Palestinian territory". It is right to report, as BBC journalism has often done since a landmark review of the corporation's coverage by its Board of Governors in 2006, that Israeli settlements "are seen as illegal under international law". East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip are Palestinian territories. Israel is the occupying power. The Fourth Geneva Convention – universally accepted as customary international law – states baldly: "the occupying power must not move any part of its population into the territory it occupies". These are not claims, but facts, and should be reported as such.

The occupation was further exacerbated by Israel's construction of a so-called separation barrier, which closed off yet more Palestinian land from habitation. The barrier was declared illegal in an advisory judgement by the International Court of Justice, in 2004. The judgement put the onus on governments to cease cooperation with the illegality, but they took no action to do so. This is what led Palestinian civil society to call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel: if governments will not take action, the onus to do so passes on to others who will.

Annabel McGoldrick (2015) has persuasively likened the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians to an abusive domestic partnership, in which Israel is the abuser, and the Palestinians are the abused. She quotes a psychologist, Lundy Bancroft, who runs programmes in the US for abusive men:

"The first challenge with an abusive man is to motivate him to work on himself. Because he becomes attached to the many rewards that his controlling and intimidating behaviors bring him, he is highly reluctant to make significant changes in his way of operating" (Bancroft, 2003: 334-5).

The pattern identified by Bancroft in abusive men is also a good description of the attitude of successive Israeli governments, not only in their controlling and intimidating behaviours towards the Palestinians but also in so-called peace talks. The latter have invariably been brokered by the United States, but Washington is also Israel's main arms dealer and diplomatic protector. For all the hand-wringing on the part of the Obama Administration over settlement-building, for example, it still approved record military aid to Israel without conditions. As the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat observed, after the talks brokered by then US Secretary of State John Kerry broke down without making progress:

"Israel refuses to negotiate sincerely because, as long as the status quo is so beneficial to it, Israel has no interest in a solution. Without firm signals from the international community, Netanyahu's occupation and colonization policies are incentivised" (Erekat, 2014).

Following the US example, other governments engage in normal diplomatic and other forms of relations with Israel, despite occasional public criticism of its policies. No portion of these relations is made conditional on Israel's behaviour, which enables the abuse to continue, and ensures the peace talks invariably fail, since Israel has no motivation to make significant changes of approach. As Bancroft remarks of the abusive men she has worked with:

"This reluctance cannot be overcome through gentle persuasion, pleading, or cajoling... I am sorry to say that I have never once seen such approaches succeed. The men who make significant progress in my program are the ones who know that their partners will definitely leave them unless they change, and the ones on probation who have a tough probation officer who demands that they really confront abusiveness. In other words, the initial impetus to change is always *extrinsic* rather than self motivated" (Bancroft, 2003: 335).

This is what I understand as the rationale for the campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions on Israel, of which the academic boycott is a part. Apparently, this, in Kempf's (2016) view, means I have "lost credibility". The remark seems, on the face of it, to muddle categories and definitions on several levels. I am both a supporter and an exponent of a nonviolent, people's campaign in response to a conflict in which peace is presently made impossible, chiefly by the reluctance of a powerful abuser to make significant changes of approach, in the absence of any extrinsic signal of the unacceptability of its behaviour. I am free to do that, as an academic researcher and a peace advocate. In 2015, it led me to intervene, at a demonstration at the University of Sydney, to ask security guards to stop dangerously manhandling student protestors who had occupied the stage of a public meeting, interrupting a speech by a retired British military officer, Colonel Richard Kemp, who was defending Israeli military actions against Palestinians. The incident led to allegations of anti-semitism against me, which were comprehensively refuted by an investigation ordered by the University (Chalmers, 2015).

From journalists, I do not expect that they join me in my advocacy; rather, that they report on this nonviolent peace initiative in a fair and accurate manner. And, in my experience, some do – although others don't. If I were still a reporter, and I suddenly started to advocate the boycott in public – or, indeed, any other policy on any other contested question – then of course I would lose credibility *in that role*. But I am no longer in that role. Which makes Kempf's remark all the more puzzling.

It is worth adding an account of the incident which first got me involved in the boycott. In 2012, I was asked to endorse an application by Professor Dan Avnon, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for a Sir Zelman Cowen Fellowship, under which he would spend six months at the University of Sydney. Faced with a binary choice – do I sign, or not? – I refused, and sent Professor Avnon an email explaining that, while I had nothing against him personally, I reserved my right not to take part in this scheme, under my policy of supporting the academic boycott.

How was this action calculated to take effect in the conflict, in the service of peace? First of all, it is intended to send a clear signal that institutional academic links will definitely be withheld from Israel unless its behaviour changes. Are universities a suitable target for boycott? Yes, for several reasons, including their own complicity with the occupation, with examples too numerous to mention here – and certainly including the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. No Israeli university; no representative body of Israeli universities, or of Israeli academics, has ever condemned the occupation, even in general terms.

Perhaps the main reason, though, can be glimpsed in the unusual nature of the Sir Zelman Cowen Fellowship scheme itself. Research fellowships are plentiful in academic life, of course – though relatively few of them come with funding attached, as this one does. Their stated aims, generally, are to foster excellence in research – and, for this reason, they usually welcome applications from as wide a cross-section of the academic profession, as possible. The wider the field, the more applications to choose from; the better the chance of the benefit going to the strongest candidates with the best ideas. In contrast, the Sir Zelman Cowen Fellowship is a bilateral arrangement between two universities. Applicants have to get at least two signatures from colleagues at the receiving institution, indicating a willingness to work with them during their stay – but they must be a staff member of one, in order to apply for a Fellowship at the other. Why limit the field in this way? Could it be that, rather than fostering excellence in academic research, the scheme's true aim is as a contribution to embedding bilateral relations with Israel at so many levels, in Australia in this case, that it remains unthinkable to make any portion of the relationship conditional on a change of policy?

A further clue can be gleaned from The Neaman Report on public diplomacy (Shinar et al, 2009), commissioned in 2009 by Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the Samuel Neaman Institute at the Technion University, Haifa – another institution that is linked with the University of Sydney by a bilateral funded fellowship scheme. This report recommends various ways to, as it were, change the subject of debate in the international community, when it comes to Israel – inducing citizens of other countries to look past the treatment of the Palestinians, and the occupation of their territory, in favour of other aspects. As such, it is geared towards reducing political pressure for a change of policy on Israel's part. Among its recommendations is to cosy up to what it calls "beneficial clients", including institutions of Higher Education. For me to have signed my name on Professor Avnon's application for a Sir Zelman Cowen Fellowship would therefore have involved me in what is, ultimately, a *hasbara* exercise. The situation in which I found myself is a close match for one of the best-known aphorisms of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel and Sydney Peace Prizes:

"To remain silent in the face of oppression is not to be neutral, but to side with the oppressor" (in Younge, 2009).

If I, as a peace academic, enjoying my freedom to be a peace advocate, were to remain silent in the face of an abusive and oppressive relationship, I would deserve to lose credibility. As it is, however, I don't.

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