

Essay

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Peace Journalism revisited

A plea for better reporting on debates, controversies and social conflicts

Abstract: A society that is challenged by multiple crises with many upheavals and conflicts needs journalists with conflict expertise. It needs journalists who are impartial, who contextualize and who report in a balanced and solution-oriented way. The media – even »quality media« – too often report on debates or conflicts using emotional and partisan language. They also increasingly make dubious diagnoses of division and polarization. Peace Journalism or Conflict-Sensitive Journalism as proposed by some peace and conflict researchers can provide inspiration and a basis for an interdisciplinary transfer of knowledge that supports good reporting on crises and social conflicts in Germany and elsewhere. They also provide an impetus for a debate about journalistic values and the role that journalism can and should play in uncertain times. This is an important topic when training new and more experienced journalists – especially in view of the communication strategies of populists and right-wing extremists who instrumentalize conflicts for their own purposes.

Keywords: Conflicts, crises, society, democracy, knowledge transfer, journalism, responsibility, framing

We are all currently experiencing upheavals, multiple crises and conflicts, some of which are mutually reinforcing and harbor further potential for conflict in the future. The aim here is not to list and describe these crises and conflicts, but to address the quality of reporting. How can journalism – itself now a professional field in permanent crisis – bring »transparency to social conditions« even when these become more complex and conflictual (MEIER 2018: 17)? What knowledge

and tools do journalists need if their work is to remain »fundamental for democracy« in the future and if they want to play a constructive role in shaping opinion in the digitalized public sphere (MEIER 2018: 17)? This is also about a journalistic self-image that does not shrug its shoulders in resignation at the mechanisms of the attention economy.

In a democracy, journalism should provide information, facts and context so that citizens can form opinions, debate, argue constructively and resolve conflicts without violence. When different points of view and different needs clash, this often results in exciting topics for the media and their audience. This is just as true for journalists in a local newsroom as it is for colleagues reporting on national, political and social issues from a news desk in the capital city. Journalists influence whether and how a conflict is perceived by the public. At best, they report objectively on the causes of the conflict and the perspectives of all parties involved as well as on existing proposals for solutions. However, they can also dramatize conflicts, report one-sidedly or according to a binary proposition of good and evil, add prejudices to their reports or use sensationalist and distorting headlines. One thing is clear: emotionalization, scandalization and generalization are part of the business model of tabloid journalism and social media platforms.

»It has to make a bang!«

However, even media with high standards of quality are criticized for too often neglecting the criteria for good journalism when it comes to controversial topics. In my opinion, this criticism is justified – even though I am sure that many journalists strive for careful and balanced reporting. Some media – for example *Die Zeit* and Deutschlandradio – have even set up news departments that deal with controversial topics and are thus intended to contribute to constructive debates. However, it is also a fact that in many media organizations, journalists do not have the knowledge and/or much time to deal in detail with conflicts and their dynamics, the difference between cause and resolution and the question of whether their reporting might turn them into conflict actors themselves. Then there is the competition for attention. Some colleagues working at the social-media-desks of established media organizations describe how they are being told that they should produce posts that make a bang – some of them then having to manage toxic comments left by users who feel encouraged by such emotional reporting. These developments may be the reason why even media committed to democracy – not always, but far too often – portray debates as conflicts and depict social conflicts as battles with frontlines, at least in headlines and on front pages. Politicians are on a collision course; they too are involved in battles or even

a »fratricidal war« (*Der Spiegel* 16/2021: Der Bruderkrieg. Wie sich die Union selbst zerlegt) – although such headlines do not always correspond to the content of the titled reports. Overall, I see a trend not to objectify disputes, but to enrich them with emotions and frame conflicts as negative social phenomena. In addition, there are narratives of division and polarization that paint a picture of an irreconcilable society. I will come back to this point later.

Anger and hatred fit in with these diagnoses of polarization as popular terms used by the media to explain conflicts and sensitivities of individual population groups (see »farmers' protests«) or even all Germans: »Why the Germans are so angry right now – and why many hate the Vice Chancellor« was how the magazine *Der Stern* chose to headline the story on the cover of issue 4/2024, for example. This is an example of hyper-emotional and emotionalizing reporting with relation to the Minister of Economic Affairs, which seems to have been normalized since the media hysteria surrounding plans for the Building Energy Act (*Gebäudeenergiegesetz*) last year. It wasn't only tabloid journalists who gave in to the temptation to personalize the controversies surrounding the planned measures and to focus on Robert Habeck personally instead of engaging objectively with the issues. Of course, one of the tasks of journalism is to critically examine the work of politicians based on facts – and not to participate in constructing enemy images while neglecting differentiation and contextualization. Differentiated, contextualizing journalism must have absolute priority when it comes to controversial existential issues such as how to deal with the climate crisis. This also applies to issues surrounding refugees and migrants, which are predominantly portrayed in terms of conflict and crisis. A lot of space is given to populist anti-migration rhetoric. In contrast, the perspectives of refugees and those who support them are rarely found in the current media discourse.

Concepts of Peace Journalism provide impetus for knowledge transfer

So what could help journalists in this challenging situation to report responsibly on contentious issues and tensions within society and to keep spaces for public discourse open? The concepts of Peace Journalism developed by conflict researchers Johan Galtung and Wilhelm Kempf in particular, further developed by journalists and academics and used in media development cooperation projects, offer inspiration and valuable impulses. Galtung and Kempf have been developing quality criteria and recommendations for improvements, especially for war reporting, since the 1980s. They also pointed out the important role of the media in preventing armed conflicts and in peace processes. Their concepts based on conflict theory still provide a valuable basis for a critical analysis of

war reporting today. However, they are also relevant for journalistic practice in contexts in which conflicts are largely conducted peacefully. This also applies to Kempf's and Galtung's calls for journalists to learn about conflicts and their dynamics and to undergo training in social psychology. As early as 30 years ago, they formulated the need for an interdisciplinary transfer of knowledge into journalistic practice, which they themselves filled with content (cf. GALTUNG 1996, 1998; KEMPF 2021).

Concepts for Peace Journalism have been extensively debated and argued over. In addition, the term »Peace Journalism« can have different meanings – depending on which scholar or journalist you talk to (BILKE 2008: 261). This also applies to the term »Conflict-Sensitive Journalism«, which is often used synonymously. I now prefer to speak of »conflict sensitivity« or »conflict sensitivity in reporting«, because I do not regard Conflict-Sensitive Journalism as being a somehow special type of journalism or as a »reporting pattern« (cf. MEIER 2019). Rather, it is good journalism about debates, social conflicts and wars, which requires appropriate skills and knowledge and is therefore relevant to all areas of journalism (cf. BILKE 2008: 271). Conflict sensitivity is therefore also an important topic for journalistic education and training.

Interdisciplinary knowledge transfer and exchange

In my seminars at the Institute of Journalism (IJ) at TU Dortmund University and in workshops, for example with trainees, the focus is currently on three topics – always in conjunction with practical examples:

- Knowledge about conflicts – including their significance for democracy, their dynamics, the differences between the causes of a conflict and the way it is played out, and conflict analysis as a research aid.
- Social Psychology: Under the heading »Journalists are people, too«, the focus is on prejudice research, biases such as negativity bias, as well as impulses for reflecting on one's own subjectivity.
- Framing and narratives: How do we perceive conflicts and how do we depict them in reporting? This also includes a discussion on whether we understand conflicts as a competition in which one party should win – or whether we adopt a solution-oriented perspective and understand conflicts as processes that should be transformed to the best interest of all parties involved (cf. KEMPF 2021).

Last year, I added the analysis and academic critique of division and polarization narratives to the seminar program (see MAU/LUX/WESTHÄUSER 2023). It is increasingly relevant to look at how populist and right-wing actors try to polarize and instrumentalize conflict and crises – and how journalism can avoid

falling for these strategies and refrain from normalizing right-wing language and narratives. In line with Galtung and Kempf, conflict sensitivity in journalism is the result of an interdisciplinary exchange between science and journalism, and scientific research into populism and right-wing extremism must now also be included in this exchange. It is important to me that the seminar program remains open to new research findings and discussions with academics working on relevant aspects.

Conflict-sensitive reporting is not a miracle cure. But I am convinced that additional know-how and more reflection can help journalists report on controversial topics and disputes in a way that benefits society, without emotionizing debates and portraying conflicts as battles – and without polarizing the audience or making them feel irreconcilable. Conflict-Sensitive Journalism does not compete with other approaches such as Constructive Journalism but complements them. Like Constructive Journalism, it also has a solution-oriented approach to reporting.

In my seminars and workshops so far, I have encountered a great deal of openness. Many students as well as more experienced colleagues want to gain know-how and exchange experiences, which they don't have time for in their everyday editorial work. They want to produce good journalism that is relevant to society. However, they are also acutely aware of this dilemma: How can we fulfill the standards of quality journalism and work in the service of the public if we are constantly under pressure to publish quickly and attract clicks?

In fact, conflict sensitivity cannot just be the responsibility of the individual journalist but must be accompanied by appropriate working conditions. This also includes more diversity in editorial offices in order to promote multi-perspective reporting. Media companies and public broadcasters that are officially committed to a journalism that promotes democracy must also protect this journalism from the pressure of the market and the logic of algorithms and platforms. It should go without saying that good reporting on conflicts should not be boring – good journalism should be interesting without exaggerated simplification and dramatization. And could conflict sensitivity not also enable media to rightly claim that they produce journalism that is knowledgeable about conflicts and crises, especially in the current climate of uncertainty and ambivalence? Ultimately, this is also about an aspect of journalistic self-understanding, as addressed by Oliver Günther and Tanjev Schultz (2021) in *Journalism Research*. Since then, the reflection of journalistic standards, values and goals has by no means become superfluous. The aspect of »conflict sensitivity« can hopefully provide valuable impetus for this reflection and debate.

About the author

Sigrun Rottmann (*1967) has worked as a journalist for print, radio and online (including *Frankfurter Rundschau*, BBC World Service London, Deutschlandfunk, WDR) since graduating in both Political Science and International Journalism. Since 2012, she has also been a part-time research assistant at the Institute for Journalism Studies at TU Dortmund University. Among other things, she teaches the seminar Conflict-Sensitive Journalism (since 2018) and also conducts workshops on this topic outside the university. She has completed further training as a systemic coach for teams and groups (DGSF certificate) and is a certified peace and conflict consultant (Academy for Conflict Transformation). Contact: sigrun.rottmann@tu-dortmund.de

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