

Tips: What a Peace Journalist Would Try to Do?

The following notes are from Peace Journalism — How To Do It, by Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick (annabelmcg@aol.com), written Sydney, 2000. See the [two contrasting articles](#) by Jake Lynch which illustrate some of these points.

1. AVOID portraying a conflict as consisting of only two parties contesting one goal. The logical outcome is for one to win and the other to lose. INSTEAD, a Peace Journalist would DISAGGREGATE the two parties into many smaller groups, pursuing many goals, opening up more creative potential for a range of outcomes.
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 civilized behavior — both 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 behavior really is to that it ascribes to "the baddies" — 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?
 - * Ask yourself 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' restatement of familiar demands or positions. INSTEAD, inquire more deeply into goals:
 - * How are people on the ground affected by the conflict in everyday life?

- * What do they want changed?
- * Is the position stated by their leaders the only way or the best way to achieve the changes they want?

6. AVOID concentrating always on what divides the parties, the differences between what they say they want. INSTEAD, try asking questions that may reveal areas of common ground and leading your report with answers which suggest some goals maybe shared or at least compatible, after all.

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 the violence.

8. AVOID blaming someone for starting it. INSTEAD, try looking at how shared problems and issues are leading to consequences that 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 grievance of all sides.

10. AVOID "victimizing" language such as "destitute," "devastated," "defenseless," "pathetic" and "tragedy," which only tells us what has been done to and could be done for a group of people. This disempowers them 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 do they think? Can they suggest any solutions? Remember refugees have surnames as well. You wouldn't call President Clinton "Bill" in a news report.

11. AVOID imprecise use of emotive words to describe what has happened to people.

- * "Genocide" means the wiping out of an entire people.
- * "Decimated" (said of a population) means reducing it to a tenth of its former size.
- * "Tragedy" is a form of drama, originally Greek, in which someone's fault or weakness 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 defenseless. Are we sure? Or might these people have died in battle?
- * "Systematic" e.g., raping or forcing people from their homes. Has it really been organized 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 minimize suffering but reserve the strongest language for the gravest situations or you will beggar the language and help to justify disproportionate responses that escalate the violence.

12. AVOID demonizing adjectives like "vicious," "cruel," "brutal" and "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.

13. AVOID demonizing labels like "terrorist," "extremist," "fanatic" and "fundamentalist." These are always given by "us" to "them." No one ever uses them to describe himself or herself, and so, for a journalist to use them is always to take sides. They mean the person is unreasonable, so it seems to make less sense to reason (negotiate) with them. INSTEAD, try calling people by the names they give themselves. Or be more precise in your descriptions.

14. AVOID focusing exclusively on the human rights abuses, misdemeanors and wrongdoings of only one side. INSTEAD, try to name ALL wrongdoers and treat equally seriously allegations made by all sides in a conflict. Treating seriously does not mean 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 chances of finding and punishing the wrongdoers as being of equal importance.

15. AVOID making an opinion or claim seem like an established fact. ("Eurico Guterres, said to be responsible for a massacre in East Timor ...") INSTEAD, tell your readers or your audience who said what. ("Eurico Guterres, accused by a top U.N. official of ordering a massacre in East Timor ...") That way you avoid signing yourself and your news service up 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 cease fire, as necessarily creating peace. INSTEAD, try to report on the issues which remain and which may still lead people to commit further acts of violence in the future. Ask what is being done to strengthen means on the ground to handle and resolve conflict nonviolently, 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 to ministers, for example, about ideas put forward by grassroots organizations. Assess peace perspectives against what you know about the issues the parties are really trying to address. Do not simply ignore them because they do not coincide with established positions.

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