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Citizen journalism online:

Promise of an alternative conflict discourse?

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“... the major cause of violence is inattention to the subjective reality of the famous other.”

Johan Galtung, 2000.

Introduction

The blog-dedicated search engine Technorati currently tracks more than 35 million sites. The popularity of personal blogging is just one aspect of a wide spectrum of developments taking place in the online environment. These developments are viewed by the social scientific community as challenging traditional journalistic practices and institutions (for example: Regan, 2003; Wall, 2005; Lowrey, 2006). In 2005, more than 7 percent of Americans who used the Internet reported that they had created a blog and the readership of the blogosphere at that time was estimated at 27 percent, with a high proportion of them younger people (Lee Kaid & Postelnicu, 2007). In 2007, 8 percent of US adult Internet users reported that they have created or worked on their own online journal or weblog (Horrigan, 2007).

In journalism and media scholarship focusing on the “new” media, some consider blogging to be a form of “citizen journalism”, also known as “participatory journalism”. This type of journalism views the citizens as “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman & Willis, 2003). One of the emerging paradigms regarding citizen journalism is that it offers an alternative to the mainstream media in terms of structure and, consequently, in terms of discourse. Some scholars suggest that unlike traditional journalism, caught in a web of institutional constraints, the blogosphere offers an environment where “high” journalistic values may flourish, such as those concerning the depth and representation of multiple perspectives (Tremayne, 2007a).

The coverage of conflict situations provides a particularly interesting area of analysis in this respect. On the one hand, structural elements of conventional journalistic practice, such as market pressure, lead the media to focus on violence and to take sides in a conflict, while suppressing deeper and more inclusive discussion (Galtung, 2000). On the other hand, the Internet, as a platform, possesses the features required to host open and inclusive coverage and analysis (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Thus an interesting question follows: has a different kind of discourse evolved online or is the Internet, like any other medium, subject to social, cultural, political and economic constraints, which impose similar, war-oriented coverage of conflicts?

In this chapter we analyse a subset of discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the blogosphere, using “peace journalism” as our conceptual frame of analysis. It is important to emphasize that we are not concerned with scholarly debate about the substance of “peace journalism” as a construct, its legitimacy as a journalistic practice, or its ethical aspects. Instead, we are employing this concept as a normative analytical framework to assess the discursive nature of conflict coverage in the blogosphere and question the structural explanation of that discourse.

We start by describing the blogging phenomenon and its relationships with traditional journalism, especially in the context of social, political and military conflicts. In this review, we are particularly interested in revealing the socio-technical structural differences between the mainstream media and the blogosphere, which can lead to production of different types of discourse. Then, we describe the concept of peace journalism as a prism for assessing discourse prevailing in conflict coverage. This approach emerges from a substantial literature on how structural constraints operate on journalistic practice and on the resulting discursive patterns. Next, based on our discussion of structural differences, we investigate whether different structural settings will generate different kinds of discourse. More specifically, we ask if the blogosphere hosts a discourse that is more oriented towards peace, given that it is freed from many institutional constraints thought to shape the war-oriented discourse of the mainstream media. We focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as our case.

We conduct a discourse analysis of a sample of blogs, using a heuristic offered by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005a, 2005b) and further developed by Shinar (2004), which suggests a number of criteria to distinguish between communication oriented towards peace and war. Finally, we offer directions and questions for future research of the “new” media environment, online discourse, and civic engagement.

Online Journalism, Participatory Journalism, and the Blogosphere

The Internet’s rapid growth over the last two decades has offered an additional platform for news information collection, analysis, verification and distribution. Since the beginning of the massive commercialization of the Internet during the 1990s, leading

mainstream media figures have been interested in adapting it for their use (Boczkowski, 2004; Schiller, 2000). Media companies initially applied traditional mass communication archetypes and business models to the online environment (Schiller, 2000). They ensured their presence in the virtual environment, for example, by creating online replicas of printed newspapers and online radio. In addition, journalistic practices started to shift due to technological advancement, allowing more visual and instant coverage of events worldwide (Boczkowski, 2004).

However, the unique characteristics of Internet's infrastructure as a distributed system, as well as its underpinning philosophy of decentralization, contributed to users' independence and their ability to creatively express themselves online. Since the explosion of the "dot.com bubble" at the start of the new millennium, we have witnessed a gradual rise of the "web 2.0" paradigm, which, despite being primarily a marketing concept, grants internet users, or netizens, a greater opportunity for agency compared with traditional media users (O'Reilly, 2005). For example, talkbacks (or readers' comments) have been introduced onto traditional news websites. Moreover, there are websites such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Digg and others that provide a platform for their users to supposedly take control of content production.

Recent developments provide an excellent example of the interdependence between the architecture of the platform and the agency granted to the users. In April 2007, the Advanced Access Content System Licensing Administrator (AACS) started issuing warnings against websites hosting information that contained an encryption key for a new format of high definition DVDs. The encryption was broken in December 2006 and since then the key has been circulating the Internet in various forms. One of the warnings was sent to a technical news ranking website Digg – a platform that allows its users to rank what they consider newsworthy items from any source on the web, including blogs and other user-generated content. In an attempt to comply with the warning based on the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (*US Public Law 105-304*, 1998), the website started deleting items containing the encryption key and also published an announcement with an explanation to its users. As a result, users reacted in unexpectedly creative ways, ranking as many news items and webpages containing the key as possible. The "revolt" escalated

to the extent that Digg's founders gave up¹ and agreed to comply with their users' will, against the demands of AACCS.² In other words, the infrastructure of Digg and its social norms allowed its users to take control of the website's content, despite the owners' attempts to censor it. This is an example of the potential of the new media environment, which was impossible in traditional mass media settings.

The changing nature of the web has repercussions in the coverage of social, political and military conflicts. A particularly interesting phenomenon is that of citizen, civic, or participatory journalism. Bowman and Willis define participatory journalism as:

The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires ((2003): 9).

In other words, in case of participatory journalism, the reader is also the author and the editor. Readers are encouraged to participate in creating news content and to react to each other's materials (Tremayne, 2007a). Some claim that participatory journalism creates a symbiotic relationship between the "journalist" and the "news-consumers", thus challenging the authority of the classical archetype of a trained "journalist". Participatory journalism is essentially a grassroots phenomenon that has recently started attracting professional journalists and established media institutions (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

Web-logs, or blogs, are considered the flagship of participatory journalism, due to their increasing popularity in recent years (Gilmor, 2006). The phenomenon dates back to the start of the new millennium. By 2004, more than 8 million people were publishing their own blogs. In 2006, Mishne and Glance (2006) estimated that blog posts were added at a rate of 700 thousand a day (including spam and inactive blogs) and in addition, the readers of the blogs left around 150 thousand comments on a daily basis. "Technorati", a company that monitors and provides search services for the blogosphere, reported in Fall

¹ For an official announcement in company's blog see: <http://blog.digg.com/?p=74>

² The incident received a wide media exposure. . For some example see Wired: <http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/news/2007/05/digglegal>, Forbes: http://www.forbes.com/technology/2007/05/02/digital-rights-management-tech-cx_ag_0502digg.html, BBC: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6615047.stm> and others.

2008 that it monitors over 1.2 million registered blogs³. Earlier, in March 2008, “Universal McCann”, released a report estimating that over 184 million people worldwide have started a blog and 346 million read blogs. Moreover, the report states that 72.8% of active internet users have read blogs at least once (Smith, 2008). In addition to “traditional” blogs, today blogs can be found as part of established online news outlets, social networking websites, corporate websites, and more. In other words, blogging is a growing phenomenon, which generates significant scholarly, political, and commercial interests.

Interestingly, conflicts and scandals signified milestones in the development of blogging as a journalistic phenomenon. In the late 1990s the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal marked the birth of online journalism. In a similar fashion, the September 11 attack can be viewed as the point where blogging emerged as a widespread phenomenon (Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2007; Tremayne, 2007a). On times of national crisis, mainstream media discourse is reduced to a single dominant voice, which is often one-sided and unbalanced. During the post 9/11 period, one could rarely find a voice critical of the US government in the US mainstream media. In this context, blogs provided an accessible and timely alternative for those who searched for additional points of view (see also: Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Martin, 2005).

Although there is an ongoing debate about the news-value of blogs and the status of bloggers as self-proclaimed journalists (Bentley et al., 2007; Papacharissi, 2007), it is difficult to overestimate the growing significance of blogosphere in the media environment. Tremayne (2007a) suggests three different patterns of influence that the blogosphere has over traditional media. First, he suggests that the blogosphere can influence the traditional media through the media themselves. In this case, bloggers influence priming by creating further visibility to issues originally published in the established media, thus making these issues more accessible and lucid to the public. The second pattern, in fact, operates by circumventing the media. Here bloggers engage in independent investigations that generate a “buzz” in the bloggers’ community, thus

³ Since 2004 Technorati has been publishing periodical “State of the Blogosphere” reports. Earlier reports (up to 2007) are available online at: <http://www.sifry.com/stateoftheliveweb/>. Last report (2008) is available online at: <http://www.technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/> and provides interesting insights into the phenomenon of blogging.

influencing actual events directly or by emerging into mainstream media debate. Finally, Tremayne notices that after initially rejecting the new platform, established mass media are now adopting it, with blogs linked to, and facilitated by, companies such as the *Washington Post*, CNN and others (see elsewhere in this volume for further discussion).

In spite of the growing complexity of relationships between the blogosphere and the mainstream media, the image of citizen journalism that is emerging is substantially different from its mainstream media counterpart. Particularly, focusing on confrontational situations, we can anticipate finding a richer and deeper discussion and analysis of conflict in the blogosphere, compared to the mainstream media. This difference can be attributed to the distinct socio-technical structure of blogosphere. Whether or not this expectation is borne out remains an open question, which we are trying to grapple with in this chapter. In the next section we consider peace journalism as a normative analytical framework for assessing news coverage of conflicts, in terms of discourse oriented towards war and peace. Using this framework, we will then test a hypothesis regarding the nature of the discourse of blogs covering conflict situations.

Reporting conflict and “peace journalism”

There is a *de facto* consensus among researchers that coverage of international conflicts is dominated by confrontational discourse, whether the conflict is of a political, social or military nature (for example: Cohen & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Hackett, 2006; Lee & Maslog, 2005; Shinar, 2007; Wolfsfeld, 2004). In recent years, however, we have witnessed an intense debate over a possibility of alternative paths of conflict coverage. Labelled as “peace journalism”, “constructive conflict coverage” or “ethically responsible journalism”, the core premise of this approach is that the mass media, as a powerful social institution, significantly shapes the conflicts it covers (Galtung, 2000; Peleg, 2006; Shinar, 2004; Tehranian, 2002).

According to Lynch and McGoldrick:

Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices -- of what stories to report and about how to report them -- that create opportunities

for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict (2005a: 5).

Galtung (2000) describes peace journalism as news coverage that focuses on people and voices opinions of all the parties involved. The reports are oriented towards providing solutions and peace is defined in terms of non-violence and creative conflict resolution, which does not necessarily include “victory” of one of the sides. Peace journalism coverage aims to make the conflict transparent, by providing background information and a wider context to any particular issue covered in a single report. According to this notion, each side has an opportunity to present its aims, positions and ideas as free from editorial intervention as possible. The intention is to allow the usually silenced, authentic voices from both sides of the conflict to be heard. At the same time, peace journalism aims at highlighting peace initiatives and action that would prevent conflicts from escalating.

One can see peace journalism as offering a view of social responsibility that encourages journalists to play an active role in helping resolve conflicts, thus explicitly affecting journalistic practice (Galtung, 2000; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2000). Identifying conceptual blocks for assessing the media discourses surrounding the coverage of peace and conflict processes, Shinar (2004) points at media frames as one of the more influential aspects constituting the normative journalism. In mainstream journalism, reporters and editors are under pressure to get their reports in front of audiences. In the process, a set of subtle viewpoints, often called media frames, have established themselves as appealing ways for how a certain story gets told. In Shinar’s analysis, war-oriented metaphors are one of those frames. So, as Shinar sees it, framing issues in terms of war is not just one viable way to address viewers, it’s a particularly compelling one, and as such is becoming fundamental to news discourse (see also: Shinar, 2007). In other words, Shinar implicitly suggests journalistic practices and routines as one of the most meaningful forces shaping the nature of conflict coverage.

To an extent, this perspective resonates with the amalgamation of two classic arguments by Tuchman(1973), and Galtung and Ruge(1965). On the one hand, Tuchman suggests newspeople use different news categories and typifications to systemize dealing with

seemingly unexpected streams of events. As such, journalists aim to routinize news reporting, she argues. On the other hand, Galtung and Ruge suggest a set of criteria that are applied to events to assess their newsworthiness. Interestingly, the extent of negative impact of an event constitutes one of the pivotal factors, which helps to simultaneously satisfy a set of others, such as unambiguity, consensuality and unexpectedness (see also: Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Relying on these two foundations - that journalists tend to place stories into pre-existing schema and prioritise the negative - we can comprehend the vicious cycle of war discourse that dominates the coverage of social, political and military conflicts in the mainstream media. The remaining question is: can an alternative pattern of coverage emerge in a different institutional setting?

Building a structural argument

The cultural, social, political, and economic settings of journalistic activity have been recognized as structural factors influencing journalistic practice, while simultaneously being shaped by it. Teharnian (2002) suggests viewing the peace/war discourse of conflict coverage in these structural terms. He argues that interaction between mutually dependent technological, social, and cultural transformations in the last few decades has created a world where media and information exchange play a pivotal role, particularly in understanding the “other”. He argues:

In our largely mediated world, reality is often constructed out of interplay of three different realities, including media, existential, and social construction of reality (p.75).

However, that same interplay has shaped the environment in a way that “communication, power, and conflict are thus inextricably tied together” (p.75). Hence, the structural factors, and profound ties between them, favour a war discourse, through routinized practices of domination and control. In other words, Tehranian argues that “the structure is the message” and media structure is the most “efficacious method of ensuring individual, corporate, and government ethical behavior” (p.34).

Blasi (2004) allows us to link the structural argument back to the news production perspective. According to Blasi, there are six factors involved in maintaining sustainable journalism practice. These include the structural aspects of media, the features of the situation that is being reported, personal features of the journalists, the political climate and the effect of lobbying, and the nature of the audience. Interaction between these factors determines news production processes, resulting in what can be defined as either war or peace journalism (see Figure 1⁴).

Building on Blasi's model, one can argue that online grassroots journalism offers a supposedly unique institutional setting, thus suggesting a "liberation" from traditional constraints. Particularly relevant for this study are the structural elements such as existing formats, editorial strategies, economic constraints and so on, which are mentioned across peace journalism literature as impacting the discourse. As a result, one would expect that features of peace journalism, suppressed by the above constraints, would be enhanced in online, citizen-driven environments.

The case of the war in Iraq provides a particular example where citizen journalism fits such a projection (Wall, 2005). During the early phases of the war, the world was exposed to the insider view of an Iraqi named Salam Pax, whose blog, "Where is Raed?" attracted the attention of the mainstream media. Compared to the embedded media that followed the US forces, his blog presented to the Western public what seemed to be an authentic and unfiltered point of view of an ordinary Iraqi (Johnson & Kaye, 2007; Piper & Ramos, 2005).

In their 2005 article, Piper and Ramos identify a rich segment of the blogosphere that addresses the ongoing war in Iraq. They distinguish between general war blogs, war news blogs, milbloggers and Iraqi blogs. General war blogs deal with analysis of the military aspects of the conflict, including its politics and casualties. War news blogs feature primarily journalists and former journalists who provide insights on the war and react to the mainstream media coverage. Milbloggers, or soldiers' blogs, are reflections of coalition soldiers, both male and female, on their personal experience in Iraq. The complex relationship between communicating their personal views and belonging to the

⁴ All the figures appear in Appendix.

military requires many of the bloggers to remain anonymous and some of them were forced to stop blogging. The fourth category is the blogs of Iraqis themselves, ranging from pro-American to highly critical ones, which present a supposedly unfiltered and raw on-the-spot view (Piper & Ramos, 2005). The actual blogging scene addressing the war in Iraq is probably even richer if one accounts for blogs that are not in English and thus not covered by Piper and Ramos. Nevertheless, among the English-speaking audiences, these blogs have generally enjoyed a high degree of authority and trust (Johnson & Kaye, 2007).

The examples above suggest that the nature of discourse in the blogosphere differs from that of the mainstream media. Yet we are left to hypothesize about the potential reasons for this. A limited analysis of the structural elements of the blogosphere suggests that it has different features compared to the mainstream media. For example, explaining the mutual influence and tension between the grassroots online media and the mainstream media, Tremayne mentions a number of factors:

First, they [bloggers] have outsider status. Like television news in the 1950s, they are seen by users as conduits to raw information, somehow less corrupted by power than their predecessors. Second, some have attained a large audience. Regardless of whether they ‘should’ have an audience, they do, and with it comes power. Third, they have ‘the power of collective’ ... Even if many individual blogs have just a few hundred regular readers, collectively the blogosphere can generate a louder ‘buzz’ ... Through individual links choices, this collective bestows upon a select few the power of authority (2007a: XVI).

From this, we can consider the structural differences between the blogosphere and the mainstream media. As a grassroots phenomenon, the blogosphere is perceived to lack the traditional hierarchical structures and profit-oriented models geared to maximise audiences. Lowrey suggests a number of additional distinctions, arguing that “the organization of production is [the] most fundamental distinction between journalism and blogging” (2006): 480). Comparing mainstream journalism to blogging, Lowery shows that the organizational structure of the former enables a more standardized and routinized

production process, while the later lacks the expertise, legitimacy and access to resources. At the same time, because they do not face mainstream journalism's organizational constraints, bloggers have less need to compromise on their values or to conform in order to reach larger audiences. They can focus on smaller but more detailed stories and are not constrained by production cycles. According to Lowery, these structural factors, combined with the subjective qualities of each occupation, result in differences "in content, work processes, tone, values and format" (2006): 480).

Clearly, blogging is different from news media not just in tone or format, but at a structural level. Following Tehranian's (2002) and Blasi's (2004) argument that the prevalence of war discourse in news is a function of the structures within which journalists are socialized, our question is: what kind of discourse evolves in a different structural setting? We have demonstrated that the blogosphere is an emerging institution that interacts with both the real world events and the mainstream media institutions. We have also shown that the blogosphere is different to a degree that allows us to argue that it can produce a different kind of content. Now, we can move to a concrete case in order to examine our hypothesis that different institutional settings would host different types of discourse. Specifically, we are interested in exploring the nature of the discourse in the blogosphere concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as a particular case for shedding more light on that conceptual causal link.

Knowing that previous studies identified a war bias in mainstream media (Keshev, 2004; Lee & Maslog, 2005; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005a, 2005b; Peleg, 2006; Shinar, 2007), will we find patterns of peace discourse in online participatory journalism as expressed in blogs? According to Lynch and McGoldrick (2005a, 2005b), the peace discourse should be open to creativity and to a variety of solutions. It should present a complex picture of the wider context and allow different voices to be heard. According to Lynch and McGoldrick, peace discourse must encourage re-thinking of established conventions about the "other" or the "enemy". It should not make assumption about intentions of other people, but instead ensure open and understanding mindset towards their motives (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005a, 2005b). In the next section we will discuss the procedures used to apply the peace journalism heuristics as it was presented by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005a, 2005b) and then further developed by Shinar (2004).

The Study

Our examination of the peace/war discourse in the blogosphere employs a critical text or linguistic analysis as is described by Phillips and Hardy (2002):

As with social linguistic analysis, critical linguistic analysis also focuses on individual texts, but with stronger interest in the dynamics of power that surround the text ... It thus shares the concerns of critical discourse analysis but focuses more closely on the microdynamics of texts. Individual pieces of text are examined to understand how structures of domination in the local or proximate context are implicated in the text (p.27).

More specifically we employ procedures informed by Fairclough (1995, 2001), as they appear in Van Dijk (1993) and in Phillips and Hardy (2002) Our study aimed at identifying discursive structures in a subset of blogs focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It asked if the content created online bears features closer to the peace journalism model proposed by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005a, 2005b) and Shinar (2004), as opposed to that of traditional journalism oriented towards war and violence. More specifically, it looked for textual constructs characteristic of journalism oriented towards: peace/conflict vs. war/violence; truth vs. propaganda; people vs. elite; solution vs. victory oriented; and war framing, trivialisation and ritualisation vs. embryonic and sporadic peace discourse (see Figure 2).

In order to pursue this quest, 150 blogs were sampled during a period of 15 days, between 19 May and 2 June 2006. The main limitation of this sample is its short time span. However this sampling period has its strengths, as there were no significant political developments in the region then and, as such, it served as a suitable time frame that minimized “noise” resulting from external influences on the discursive patterns. The blogs were selected through technorati.com using a search string "(Palestine OR Palestinian) AND (Israel OR Israeli)", and the authority-ranking mechanism offered by the website.

The search criteria demonstrate one of the major challenges facing those researching the “new” media. By considering blogs containing both terms related to the conflict, we excluded the extreme blogs referring to only one of the sides or using different, less politically correct, terms to define the parties. Moreover, our search did not include posts in languages other than English, which could have further skewed the data. In this way, our sample might have been biased towards the peace journalism discourse or not related to conflict at all. At the same time, one could also view it as focusing on mainstream blogosphere discourse, particularly given the dominance of English language in the Internet.

In addition, we used Technorati’s ranking system to select each day 10 posts from the blogs that had the highest authority. Since the authority-ranking mechanism constitutes one of the unique features of Technorati, the company does not reveal its exact formula. However, from publicly available information on the company’s blog, we can ascertain that it is primarily based on the number of incoming links to a particular blog in a given period of time. This approach to assessing the authority of blogs is widespread in the blogosphere (Tremayne, 2007a; Java, Kolari, Finin, & Oates, 2006). It is, in fact, similar to the logic behind calculating the impact factor of academic journals based on how often articles published in them are cited (for example see: Chen, Xie, Maslov, & Redner, 2007; Mingers & Harzing, 2007). We have no information as to whether or not the fact that the sampling was conducted from an Israeli IP address influenced the results.

Findings

Analyzing the texts, our first striking observation was the degree to which bloggers regurgitate mainstream media reports - a tendency also observed by others such as Lowrey (2006), Rutigliano (2007) and Tremayne (2007b). Most of the blogs on our sample contained quotes, links or commentary from mainstream media news items. For example; a blog titled “A Daily Briefing on Iran” started its post on May 25 with the title: “Israelis Aim to Sue Ahmadinejad” followed by a direct quotation from the BBC News: “A group of Israeli diplomats wants to sue Iran's President...” Another example is a blog titled “Jihad Watch” that starts its 29 May post titled “Israeli retaliates to attacks,

bombs bases in Lebanon” with a direct quote from Reuters. In these cases, the mainstream media item is used either as is, or is followed by a commentary that then generated an intense discussion with and among readers of the blog.

The discussion surrounding mainstream media items is similar to the discussion one can find on the talkback pages of established news websites. For example a 30 May post at “Dhimmi Watch” was titled “Israel ‘to allow arms to Abbas’” and cited a BBC article about military support for Mahmoud Abbas’s forces. This post caused responses such as the following:

“Where did this guy Olmert come from? This is a world leader that only Muslims and liberals could love...” (Posted by: Ironman Hondo).

“Give them all [Palestinians] a gun, with one bullet each, the gun can only be fired once, retreat to safe distance...” (Posted by: IceDragon).

“I thought every Palestinian already owned an AK47 and/or an rpg”.
(Posted by: MP).

As we can see, these reactions do not offer a discussion, but are more a collection of “dead-end statements” expressing readers’ opinions, sometimes in a sarcastic way. Moreover, they do not address the post itself or the cited item, but use them as an excuse for expressing personal prejudices.

However, in other blogs we found criticisms of the mainstream media’s coverage. For example, on 31 May a blog “Liberty and Justice” quoted Ha’aretz’s report about an Israeli Defence Forces’ preventive attack in the Gaza strip. In the commentary following the citation, the blogger wrote:

“The Dutch MSM⁵ seldom reports about Palestinian organizations trying to kill Israeli civilians. We hear about what Israel does, but everything the Palestinians do, seems to mostly be ignored *or* it's, in some way or another, Israel's fault anyway.”

⁵ MSM is a widely used by bloggers abbreviation for mainstream media.

Another interesting example can be found in a 27 May post at Yourish.com, which was dedicated to a critique of *The New York Times* editorial from 25 May. The post itself is interesting because it uses comparison to the blogosphere as a tool of critique:

“And it happened reading this editorial in NYT. Wow, man! You get, like, a blog of your own, but a) you get paid a good buck and b) lotsa folks are going to read it. And all the other conveniences of the blog: anonymity (it is NYT that has written it, after all, not a specific bloke – go and clean the clock of all the flunkies there – quite a sweaty undertaking), ability to write any bullshit that comes to mind and stuff...”

In this case, the comment space was also utilized to further criticize *The New York Times*:

“... I stopped reading the Times some years ago. This editorial is a reminder that I made the right decision”. Posted by: Jack Rich.

“Thankfully the last time I purchased The New York Times was back in February 2004. Never Again!” Posted by Joel.

Extended reference to and open criticism of the mainstream media suggest a complex relationship between them and the bloggers. On the one hand, the mainstream media can be viewed as agenda setters for the blogosphere, but on the other hand, the bloggers often identify themselves in an opposition to the institutionalised journalism. We will get back to this complexity in discussion of our results as it will help us to understand other findings as well as develop a future research agenda.

Analyzing the posts and their comments through the lens of a peace journalism model (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005a, 2005b) reveals a complex view of the conflict with some trends emerging. We can see that the blogosphere is capable of hosting views consistent with a very extreme version of war journalism, particularly in the war/violence-oriented domain. For example, on 27 May, a blogger named “PC Free Zone” published a post titled “‘Hezbollah, Hezbollah,’ Chanted The Iranian Crowd of Suicide Bombers”. The post consisted of pictures from a demonstration supporting suicide bombing in Teheran, featuring men and women wearing headbands identifying their willingness to sacrifice their lives. One of the images featured unified lines of men in white clothes, their arms

crossed on their chests, their faces completely covered with distinctive scarves bound with red headband stating “there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet” in Arabic. The caption under that image read: “Iranian men wear white shrouds to indicate their willingness to give their lives to defend their country and Islam, during a gathering in Tehran on Thursday, May 25, 2006”. The other image pictured a woman holding a little girl on her lap, both wearing traditional clothes and green headbands with the same quote from Quran. The caption under that image read: “An Iranian woman and her daughter wearing headbands reading 'there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet' as they attend a suicide bombers gathering in southern Tehran”

The images in the example above suggest a homogenized view of the “other” as a faceless mob. They also dehumanize them by presenting a mother socializing her daughter into the culture of martyrdom. This perspective is further emphasized in the text, which included direct quotes from a Forbes article:

A huge banner used as a backdrop showed flag-covered coffins. And a message – in English – promised to "damage the U.S. worldwide" in retaliation for any attack on Iran....

Volunteers mingled around monuments to attackers, including a Palestinian suicide bomber, an Iranian militiaman killed by the U.S. forces in Iraq and two commandos who helped carry out the 1983 blast at Marine barracks in Beirut that killed 241 U.S. servicemen. An almost simultaneous bombing killed 56 French peacekeepers...

“I only have one son and he's volunteered as a martyr," said Marium Nematzadeh, 56. “I have deep belief in my religion and my leaders. I would even become a bomber if asked.”

Although the post does not address directly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is mentioned there in the context of the debate on suicide bombing, where the conflict plays a prominent role. The choice of the event and the way it is presented portrays the conflict in the broader situation of the Middle East. However, it is still described in terms of war journalism. It focuses on propaganda, emphasizing the propaganda of the “other” side.

Thus it implies a sharp division between “us” and “them”, portraying “them” as a problem, as warmongers promoting violence focusing on “their” victory.

Taking into account our previous observation about the relationships between bloggers and the mainstream media, one could suggest that the violent discourse stems from the fact that the post described above is actually a replica of an article from the mainstream media. In this case, the *choice* of re-publishing the specific article becomes particularly interesting. While most research on online discourse focuses on what people write, less attention has been paid to what people re-post. However, that re-posting of a mainstream media article, even if its done without any explanation or commentary, can still be read as a communicative act, though not an easy one to interpret. Considering the ease with which articles can be re-posted or linked to, this gesture of re-distribution would be worth examining, but it is out of the scope of the current study. At the same time, viewing some of the personal commentary by bloggers also suggests similarly strong war-oriented discourse. For example, a blogger “Right on the Right” posted the following commentary on May 21, under a title “Another Terrorist Bastard Dead”:

I’m tired of the Leftist Liberals who consider Palestinians “Freedom Fighters” and call Israel “Occupiers.” Look at their tactics, and look at their ideology, and you tell me which side is full of terrorists and which side is full of innocent people. The Israelis are fighting to secure their sovereignty while the Palestinians aren’t fighting for a homeland, but rather because of a radical Islamofascist agenda. I hate the Palestinian Terrorists, and I hope they all die.

Following the commentary, the blogger posted an unidentified news item about a successful assassination of a member of Islamic Jihad in Gaza. Then he continues:

For those of who that don’t know, Islamic Jihad is a radical terrorist paramilitary group with ties to groups such as Al-Qaeda and Hamas. All of these groups also receive moderate support (sometimes in the form of weapons) from the terrorists in Iran. If you don’t think Israel is assisting in the War on Terror by doing this, you need to learn about the Global

Jihadist Movement going on in the Middle East. Another terrorist bastard is dead, which is good for the world, and good for the United States.

Carefully examining this post, one can see a language oriented more towards extreme violence and victory, compared to the previous example. The blogger is praising the death of an “enemy”, treating them again as a homogeneous mass whose sole purpose is violently fighting “us”. The mixture of the news item that actually describes elimination of the “enemy” and the commentary amplifies the war aspects of the discourse.

There are many examples of war discourse among the posts:

“Israel will crush them with an iron fist [...] There’s a sense that Bush and Olmert are enjoying their vicious game of punishing the Palestinians for their choice at the ballot box.[...] The US and Israel are determined to achieve their narrow objectives even if it means sacrificing the lives countless women and children. This isn’t policy; its barbarism. (Posted by: Global War).

“The Jews don’t want peace, they want to kick us to Jordan [...] Israelis are the main enemy and the main source of suffering.” (Posted by: Michael J Totten).

“[Palestinian] leaders have bombed women and children, using children as the suicide bombers, for years. Their ‘culture’ seems to be built on corruption and brutality.” (Posted by: The Strata-Sphere).

“Nonsense [--] it is an ancient Arab propaganda lie. Israel never had any imperial ambitions, the Israelis only wanted to be left to live in peace, something the Arabs have never allowed them. In this lie we see the Arabs’ projection onto the Israelis of their own vicious ambitions.” (Posted by: Yourish.com).

“Ahmadi may talk about genocide, but genocide has been already committed by Jews, and if it were not for their protector and colony (called USA), all their leaders would be tried for genocide and hung by their balls.” (Posted by: A Daily Briefing on Iran).

In general, more than 60 percent of the posts analysed presented a war-oriented discourse.

In some instances, the war discourse is created mainly through the readers' commentary. For example, on 1 June, a blog named "Hot Air" published a post titled "Pali PM Haniyeh: Bush administration is the enemy of all Muslims". The post addressed Hamas leaders' comments regarding George W. Bush and the language was oriented towards war. However, the comments of the readers provided an even more inflammatory discourse, which at times some could even classify as racism:

"No matter what you do to help Muslims and/or Arabs, no matter what you do to be friends with them, to explain yourself to them, to get closer to them, no matter what you do, they will hate you and they will seize any chance to destroy you." (Posted by: CatholicConservative).

"This is the first time we have ever faced an enemy that truly believes that if we ALL die, including they themselves... THEY WIN. Remember the old saying that there is no one more dangerous than someone who no longer gives a s**t? Welcome to post 9-11, folks." (Posted by: horsepower_1st).

"Damn straight. The enemy is ISLAM!!!" (Posted by: ecamorg).

"The Muslim Faith is the Enemy of the Entire World" (Posted by: MaiDee).

"The so-called "founder" of their evil cult -- Islam -- was a mass-murder [sic], that tells it all. Hitler, compared to Muhammad, is an angel" (Posted by: CatholicConservative).

However, the blogosphere also presents more complex examples, such as in the following instance. On 23 May a blog named "Captain's Quarters", posted a claim that accused the Palestinians of creating the situation in the West Bank: "This is what happens when people elect terrorists to office, and when they produce no choice other than terrorists or crooks."

Again, we can see in this statement how the text focuses on closed time and context-less causes. It portrays “them” as a problem, while viewing Palestinians as a dehumanized, homogenous mass. However, looking at the readers’ comments, we can find the following statement: “You’re referring to Hamas with this statement, but it just as well refers to Fateh. Westerners need to shed our belief that Fateh is a viable partner for peace”. (Posted by: Jeremiah).

This comment reveals an interesting phenomenon. On the surface, it continues the war discourse in an attempt to homogenize the enemy. However, by doing so, it raises the awareness of potential differences among Palestinians, which resonates with another comment: “My guess is that Hamas will chase Fatah out of Gaza and that if Abbas shows some spine, Fatah will chase Hamas out of the West Bank.” (Posted by: TimK).

Thus we can see that even though the overall language used in both the post and the readers’ comments remains war/violence-oriented, the interaction between different actors creates a more complex picture of the Palestinians as enemies. The internal politics within Palestine has particular importance in this instance.

Furthermore, in a limited numbers of blogs, we came across a few expressions characteristic of the peace journalism discourse. Those usually featured peace initiatives and political discussion and are still focused on covering elite figures or elite news sources. For example, on 26 May, “Israpundit” published a post containing the following: “[...] realignment comes not to bury the road map, but to push it forward.”

Part of another blog, “Tikun Olam” had the following text on May 26: “Israel and the U.S.... called on Hamas to accept the Hadarim peace proposal...this could be a turning point that gets us closer to final status negotiations happening in months rather than years or even decades.” A more explicit peace journalism discourse can be found in posts focusing on ordinary people as opposed to those focused on the elite. A blog by Michael J.Totten, “The Other Side of the Green Line”, consists of 4,519 words and 22 colour pictures. It is a personal journal of Mr. Totten’s visit to Ramallah. The post quotes civilians and a number of Palestinian politicians, thus presenting a complex picture of the current conflict, which focuses on the people involved and their feelings:

“It will be good for everyone when Israel is accepted as part of this

region,” he said. “The other countries will get some of Israel’s technology. Everyone will benefit from more money and tourism.”

“I have Israeli friends, ” he said. “I tell them things that I don’t tell some of my Arab friends. It depends on the person, not the nationality.”

However, instances such as that presented above are rare. The bloggers’ reliance on the mainstream media and the relative anonymity provided by the Internet appear to reinforce each other as attributes generating a discourse oriented towards war. The lack of the structural constraints does indeed seem to generate a different type of discourse. However, contrary to our hypothesis, this discourse, in most observed cases, has the hallmarks of war journalism, which are, at times, more extreme compared to those one can see in the mainstream media.

Discussion and conclusion

Building on a body of knowledge showing that the blogosphere is constituted by and operates in a structural environment different from that of the mainstream media, we expected to find patterns and elements of different, peace-oriented, discourse in the blogosphere. Yet, our preliminary results show that the online environment hosts a surprisingly hostile discourse.

In general, the bloggers’ presentation and discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tends to diverge towards the extremes. Even when the blogs present a complex picture and employ a relatively moderate discourse, comments on their posts use arguments oriented towards war and violence. The dominant discourse thus matches what Hanitzsch (2004a) and others label as “journalism of attachment” or simply put, journalism that is taking a side in a conflict.

Another example is a phenomenon where many posts refer to or duplicate items from the mainstream media. As such, they replicate the war discourse presented in mainstream news coverage. Moreover, in many instances the violent discourse is amplified by comments left by users who do not hesitate in taking sides. At the same time, some posts are critical of the mainstream media, with comments tending to reinforce that perspective.

Interestingly, Israeli bloggers adopted a similar pattern in criticizing the mainstream media during the second Lebanon war in the summer of 2006 (Tautig, 2006).

Even though the blogosphere seems to promise a platform conducive to constructive and peace-oriented discussions, the emerging picture is that of a complex environment bearing many of the characteristics of war and populist journalism. One possible explanation for this apparent contradiction lies in the cultural realm. Hanitzsch (2004b) suggests that peace depends on media users and their culture, beliefs and perceptions. As such, he claims, we cannot expect from the journalists greater engagement with peace than we expect from their audiences. Extending this argument to our analysis of the blogosphere, one may view journalists and their audiences as participants in the same culture. Accepting that proposition, we can better understand the lack of peace discourse in the grassroots media. Since grassroots journalists are not part of a peace culture, the discourse created in the blogosphere will be more oriented towards violence and war.

We do find peace discourse when the topic of posts is related to peace initiatives. However, similar to Shinar's (2004) observation, these efforts are still framed in war journalism terms. The more explicit elements of peace journalism are found in posts addressing personal experiences, such as the example of Michael J. Totten described above. These posts tend to focus on individuals affected by the conflict, but at the same time they present the context of the conflict and focus on the importance of its resolution. Such posts are usually framed in non-violent language and they acknowledge suffering and motivations for action on both sides. As such, those examples can be viewed as instances of peace-oriented discourse or peace journalism. In other words, blogosphere as a platform is open to peace oriented discourse, but human agency is the determining factor regarding the type of emerging discourse. Bloggers bring into the blogosphere different socio-cultural practices, and those practices shape different kinds of coverage and discussion surrounding the conflict. This observation, again, resonates with Hanitzsch's (2004b) argument about the importance of cultural context for journalistic practices. At the same time, this observation can suggest that traditional media and their institutional settings act as filtering mechanisms that do not allow extreme views penetrating the mainstream discourse. Lacking such mechanisms in the blogosphere, unleashes both the extremely violent and the extremely peaceful discourses.

Though limited, the current study raises important questions and suggests a number of potential directions for further research on peace journalism and especially the new media domain. Working on this study and focusing on the blogosphere, we saw a need for both more breadth and depth of inquiry. First, we see a need to map the terrain of the blogosphere dealing with a particular conflict. Understanding the interconnectivity between different bloggers and between bloggers and mainstream media covering a specific conflict will provide additional context for the discourse analysis proposed here. In addition, a quantitative study is needed, similar to those carried out on the mainstream media. Developing this direction could allow for comparative studies to further address the idea of civil journalism in the context of peace journalism studies and beyond. At the same time, research needs to extend the scope of inquiry to include blogs that are not written in English, but especially in Hebrew and Arabic, as native languages of the conflict parties. One could argue that together with the mainstream media monitoring initiatives, such as “Keshev” and “Miftah” (Keshev, 2004), there is a need for longitudinal follow-up on the online grassroots discourse.

In addition to further study of the blogosphere, our study raises questions regarding other factors shaping the grassroots online discourse. Hanitzsch (2004b) suggests cultural elements as a possible explanation. Building on Tehranian (2002), one can suggest further inquiry into social structures governing cyberspace, particularly the blogosphere and participatory domains. Another interesting question arises about the role of the technological infrastructure itself. For example, one of the researchers is currently involved in a project looking into the effectiveness of collaborative platforms, such as wiki-based engines, in promoting dialogue and reaching consensus. In this context, blogs can be viewed as an isolated creative process, compared to the socially-interactive nature of collaborative work in a wiki.

To conclude, our study is one of the first steps in exploring the peace journalism paradigm, as applied to the “new” media. It raises many questions, particularly regarding the role of technology and the associated social structures as mediators of discourse surrounding social, political and military conflicts. It shows the potential strength of the communication technologies, but also emphasizes the importance of human agency in

this process. More research is necessary in this domain, bearing in mind the applied potential and importance of communication in public life and peace processes.

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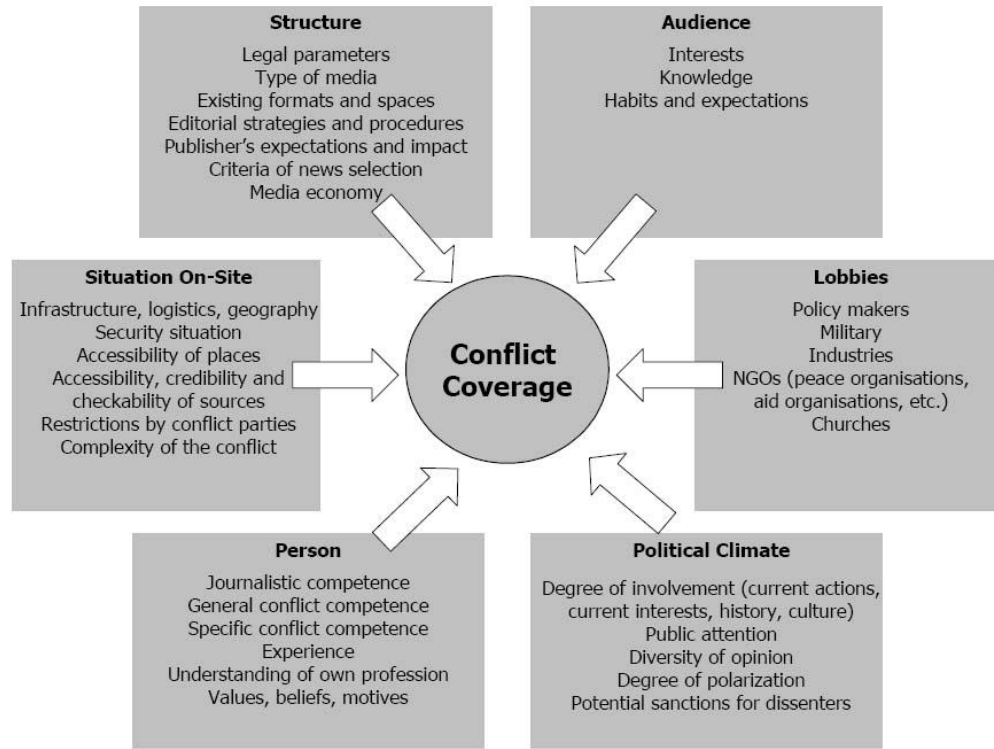
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Appendix

Figure 1: Six factors influencing conflict coverage production



Source: Blasi (2004:5)

Figure 2

| Peace/Conflict Journalism | War/Violence Journalism CITIZEN JOURNALISM ONLINE |
|---|---|
| <p><i>I. Peace/Conflict-oriented</i></p> <p>Explore conflict formation; x parties, y goals, z issues general ‘win win’ orientation</p> <p>open space, open time; causes and outcomes anywhere, also on history/culture</p> <p>making conflict transparent</p> <p>giving voice to all parties; empathy, understanding see conflict/war as problem, focus on conflict creativity</p> <p>humanization of all sides; more so the worse the weapon</p> <p>proactive; prevention before any violence/war occurs</p> <p>focus on invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture)</p> | <p><i>I. War/Violence-oriented</i></p> <p>Focus on conflict arena; 2 parties, 1 goal (win), war general zero-sum game orientation</p> <p>close space, closed time; causes and exits in arena, who threw the first stone</p> <p>making wars opaque/secret</p> <p>‘us-them’ journalism, propaganda, voice, for ‘us’</p> <p>see ‘them’ as the problem, focus on who prevails in war</p> <p>dehumanization o ‘them’; more so the worse the weapon</p> <p>reactive; waiting for violence before reporting</p> <p>focus only on visible effect of violence (killed, wounded and material damage)</p> |
| <p><i>II. truth-orientated</i></p> <p>Expose untruths on all sides / uncover all cover-ups</p> | <p><i>II. Propaganda-orientated</i></p> <p>Expose ‘their’ untruths / help ‘our’ cover-ups/lies</p> |
| <p><i>III. People-orientated</i></p> <p>Focus on suffering all over; on women, aged, children, giving voice to voiceless</p> <p>give name to all evil-doers</p> <p>focus on people peace-makers</p> | <p><i>III. Elite-orientated</i></p> <p>Focus on ‘our’ suffering; on able-bodied elite males, being their mouth-piece</p> <p>give name of their evil-doers</p> <p>focus on elite peace-makers</p> |
| <p><i>IV. Solution-orientated</i></p> <p>Peace = non-violence + creativity</p> <p>highlight peace initiatives, also to prevent more war focus on structure, culture, the peaceful society aftermath; resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation</p> | <p><i>IV. Victory-orientated</i></p> <p>Peace = victory + ceasefire</p> <p>conceal peace initiatives; before victory is at hand focus on treaty, institution, the controlled society</p> <p>leaving for another war, return if the old flares up again</p> |
| <p><i>V. War-Oriented Media Framing</i> Framing Peace Stories in War Discourse</p> <p>trivialization</p> <p>ritualization</p> | <p><i>V. Peace-Oriented Media Framing</i> Embryonic, sporadic peace discourse</p> <p>experimental demonstrations of peace discourse</p> <p><i>Style: Media Event Techniques</i> Redefining Rules of Journalism</p> <p>adapting narrative style; conquests, contests, coronations</p> <p>adapting performance styles; equal access humanization, dramatic coherence, interpretation of context and symbols</p> <p><i>Content: textual analysis genres</i> ‘Master-frames’, ‘super-texts’, made of peace-related ‘products’</p> <p><i>Constitutive rhetoric</i> Assignment of meaning to new symbolic entities/processes (i.e. peace), through reality construction and combination of social and historical narratives with ideological objectives</p> |

Based on Lynch & McGoldrick (2005a,2005b) and Shinar (2004).