



Article

Peace Journalism Training for Journalists as a Contribution to PVE in the New Afghanistan

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Abstract: This article presents and discusses results from an exercise in comparative content analysis of news articles about issues of conflict produced by Afghan journalists before and after participating in an internationally sponsored training and mentorship programme in Peace Journalism. The programme was part of a Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) project, intended to create community resources for resilience, in the information sphere, towards conflict issues contributing to recruitment by non-state armed groups such as Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS–KP). Peace Journalism is familiar as the basis for media development aid in contexts of conflict; however, its use in an intervention aimed specifically at PVE is relatively new. The results showed that the programme was effective, it is argued, in terms of benefits transferred to and applied by participating journalists. A sample of articles after the training showed a markedly higher Peace Journalism quotient than a baseline sample of articles by the same journalists before it. This suggested that the training and mentorship had successfully stimulated and enabled journalistic agency, taking account of constraints imposed by media structures and wider political and social contexts. The latter have become steadily more onerous under the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) government, in power since August 2021, according to international monitoring organisations. Implications are considered, in light of the findings, for future media development aid to Afghanistan.



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1. Introduction

The Peace Journalism (PJ) model, originally proposed by Johan Galtung as a set of ideational distinctions in news representations of conflict, has served as the organising principle for both scholarly research and practical application. Much of the latter has come through media development aid, often taking the form of professional training courses for editors and reporters. The effectiveness of such schemes depends on activating and galvanising journalistic agency to change the content of reporting. The extent of this activity can be gauged from grey literature such as *The Peace Journalist*, published biannually by the Global Peace Journalism Center at Park University, Missouri. Lynch and Tiripelli (2022) found 55 reports of such interventions, in 33 countries, in the magazine's first 19 editions, from April 2012.

From the early days of such interventions, however, trainers were reporting such risks as “creating cycles of empowerment and disempowerment” (Lloyd 2003, p. 118), as trainees, enthused with new ideas, returned afterwards to the same office settings, with the same constraints. Adebayo found that journalist participants in a PJ workshop in Nigeria wanted to “set a positive developmental agenda for public discourse”, but found themselves “act[ing] as muffled drums because of the overbearing influence of media owners and draconian government policies” (Adebayo 2016, p. 375). An early scholarly critique complained that PJ exponents tended to adopt “an overly individualistic and voluntaristic perspective” (Hanitzsch 2008, p. 75), giving rise to exaggerated assessments of the extent of change in news practices that could be brought about through such means.



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Reporting of conflict issues by Afghan media, from the time of the abortive US-sponsored peace talks with the then insurgent Taliban in September 2020, was found (Lynch and Freear 2023) to display a predominant pattern of War Journalism, and little or no Peace Journalism, on the distinctions in the Galtung model. In the same study, Afghan journalists were interviewed (n = 16), and asked whether, how, and to what extent this pattern of reporting matched their own aspirations for their journalism. “The dominant pattern of coverage did not align with their own notions of how the conflict and the issues in the peace negotiations should be reported. . . Afghan journalists interviewed for this study wanted to do more Peace Journalism”, the researchers found.

Such receptiveness to the tenets of PJ is not untypical among journalists in non-Western settings, Hussain writes. However, “the main obstacles to Peace Journalism in the non-Western world are lack of media freedom, threats to life and security, unfavourable socio-cultural conditions and lack of resources for journalists” (Hussain 2022, p. 116). Aside from the direct obstacles brought about by political and security considerations, the constraint on reporting by Afghan media most often identified by the interview subjects was “a lack of suitable training, particularly in Peace Journalism” (ibid.)

In response to these findings, over a period of five months in 2023, a journalist training programme was devised and implemented, in several stages:

- A group of five Afghan journalist trainers themselves underwent training, provided online through an international aid programme, in Peace Journalism;
- They then facilitated a week-long residential training workshop for Afghan journalists, held in neighbouring Pakistan. Thirty journalists were trained in total, 20 residing in Afghanistan and 10 in Pakistan (of whom three were living in Peshawar and seven in Islamabad). Of the 30 trainees, seven were women.
- The trainees continued to be mentored as they returned to their newsrooms and produced pieces of Peace Journalism, integrating new ideas with the work they had brought to the training, and publishing and/or broadcasting it. They contributed to 49 news outlets in total, including television, radio, magazines, and newspapers.

The context for this intervention was conceived with reference to the United Nations Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2016). This “involves aligning ongoing humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, security, and political interventions with the goals of preventing violent extremism”, across many fields (Thiessen 2019, p. 1). One specifically mentioned in a contemporaneous policy document from the United Nations Development Programme is “promoting messages of tolerance in the media”¹. Integrating Peace Journalism—or Conflict Sensitive Journalism, as it is sometimes called—within a P/CVE programme is an approach that has been applied previously to address factors associated with violent extremism in Kenya, including under-representation in media, historical grievances and complaints over poor governance (Freear and Glazard 2021). However, the present study deals with the first intervention of its kind in Afghanistan.

Such an intervention can, in turn, be seen to align with the UN’s Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, intended as a framework for activities in the international aid sector. Within it, “peaceful and inclusive societies” are nominated as an essential co-requisite of sustainable development, in Goal 16, within which Target 10 mentions “public access to information” as a means by which these conditions are to be engendered. So, distinctions of Peace Journalism coding, for evaluation purposes, were adjusted accordingly (see full discussion below).

2. Research Questions and Method

The overarching aim of the research was to ascertain whether, how, and how far the participating journalists changed their approach to reporting of overlapping issues pertaining to conflict, preventing violent extremism, and sustainable development, after the training, by comparing their new outputs with those they had previously produced.

The Research Questions were, therefore:

- How much War Journalism and how much Peace Journalism were the journalists producing in their work before entering the programme of training and mentoring?
- How did this compare with the extent of War Journalism and Peace Journalism in stories produced by the same journalists, through and after the programme?

Hence, the participating journalists were asked to provide examples of their work, comprising news articles on conflict and related issues, before the programme of mentoring and training began. These were translated then analysed and taken as a baseline sample, then compared with a second sample, comprising articles they had prepared, published and/or broadcast during or after the programme. The latter reflected new ideas they had developed in the training, in close consultation with the mentors.

The unit of analysis was therefore the individual story. The content analysis was carried out using evaluative criteria derived from distinctions in the Peace Journalism Model, which takes the form of a table setting out a series of dyads. Table 1 sets out Galtung’s original Peace Journalism model (Lynch and Galtung 2010, p. 13).

Table 1. The Peace Journalism model.

War/Violence Journalism	Peace/Conflict Journalism
<p>I. Violence/victory-oriented two parties, one goal, causes and exits in arena focus on visible effects of violence (killed, wounded, and material damage) making wars opaque/secret ‘us–them’ journalism, propaganda, voice, for ‘us’ see ‘them’ as the problem focus on who prevails in war dehumanisation of ‘them’—more so, the worse the weapons reactive: waiting for violence to occur before reporting</p>	<p>I. Peace/conflict-oriented X parties, y goals, causes and exits anywhere focus also on invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture) making conflicts transparent giving voice to all parties; empathy, understanding see conflict/war as problem focus on conflict creativity humanisation of all sides—more so, the worse the weapon proactive: reporting also before violence/war occurs</p>
<p>II. Propaganda-oriented expose ‘their’ untruths help ‘our’ cover-ups/lies</p>	<p>II. Truth-oriented expose untruths on all sides uncover all cover-ups</p>
<p>III. Elite-oriented focus on ‘their’ violence and on ‘our’ suffering on able-bodied elite males give name of their evildoer focus on elite peace-makers being elite mouthpiece</p>	<p>III. People-oriented focus on violence by all sides and on suffering all over also on women, elderly, children, give name to all evildoers focus on people peace-makers giving voice to the voiceless</p>
<p>IV. Victory-oriented Peace = victory + ceasefire conceal peace initiative before victory is at hand focus on treaty, institution, the controlled society leaving for another war, return if the old flares up</p>	<p>IV. Solution-oriented Peace = nonviolence + creativity highlight peace initiatives, also to prevent more war focus on structure, culture, the peaceful society aftermath: resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation</p>

This yielded eight coding categories, with a ninth added, to denote the provision or otherwise in the reports of a “framework of understanding” to connect the story material to broader conflict frames (see discussion below). The coding was carried out with due attention to the gendered implications of conflict issues in Afghanistan over the time frame from which the sample material was taken (again, see discussion below).

The samples were coded manually by the two co-authors. The content in each story was analysed for the presence of indicators from any of the four orientations on either side of the table: War Journalism and Peace Journalism. A score of 1 was recorded each time an indicator was found. Scott’s pi, a measure of inter-rater agreement used to establish reliability of findings by two raters, was calculated, and used to validate the results. To calculate observed agreement using this method, the number of items on which raters agree is divided by the total number of items.

To elaborate on the coding categories, as adapted for the current context: in a war and violence-orientation, conflict is represented as a zero-sum game, where two antagonistic parties contest the single goal of victory (which, for the other, means inevitable defeat). Significantly, such representations are also characteristic of messaging by violent extremist groups, which typically counterposes “us against them” (Post 1987).

Causes of—and possible exits from—the conflict are confined to the immediate arena of hostilities, whereas peace- and conflict-orientation mean going beyond the familiar tit-for-tat sequence of direct violence, instead allowing for multiple parties and goals, with causes and exits anywhere in time and/or space.

In practical terms, by reporting only violent incidents, or ritualised denunciations of the ‘enemy’ by leaders on either of two ‘sides’, War Journalism typically omits the goals of the parties, or the issues (of grievance, relative deprivation, injustice, unmet needs and interests) that lead them to engage in the conflict, including through violence, in the first place. Generally, their reasons for acting as they do remain obscured by the sophisticated and aggressive communication of violent ideological dogma. In the case of violent extremism, this enhances the appearance of acting beyond the realm of reason, so there is no point reasoning (negotiating) with any of ‘them’. This can render news audiences cognitively primed for violent responses. “By focusing on physical violence divorced from context, and on win–lose scenarios. . . news unwittingly incentivises conflict escalation and ‘crackdowns’” (Hackett 2011, p. 40).

Truth-orientation may refer to the familiar duty of public service media to accurate reporting. At any rate, it indicates, in the specific context of reporting conflict, the inclusion and/or juxtaposition of material calculated or likely to activate critical thinking by audiences served up with propaganda, or partial, self-serving claims and statements, by one or more parties. In PVE initiatives, this could take the form of furnishing public discourse with insights into the grievances, economic and social factors, and individual stories behind violent extremism, in addition to the ideological discourse that is propagated as the ‘reason for violence’.

Reporting that adopts these two orientations—peace-and-conflict, and truth—in tandem may help to contextualise and relativise a group such as IS–KP, for instance: revealing commonalities in its composition, patterns of recruitment, orientation to authority, and motivating issues, with those of many other armed groups around the world, thus de-bunking the myth of its special status. This may enable audiences to understand its activities and messaging in the context of a constant challenge to prove relevance and impact in competition with rivals; the related search for secure funding and a steady stream of fighters, and arms; and the need to present strategy within a higher, ideological framework for the purposes of recruitment and morale².

A people-orientation is often fulfilled by featuring efforts at conflict resolution, bridge-building, and peaceful coexistence by actors and institutions at sub-elite levels. The ability to surface a range of perspectives, issues, and voices from the population at large is of significance and dilutes the polarising effects of violent extremism.

Conflict coverage can be seen, finally, as solution-oriented if causes are explained, and problems diagnosed, in terms of intelligible sequences of stimulus and response. If audiences can see how the processes of a conflict lead up to events—including violent events—that dominate the news, they are more likely to be receptive to treatment recommendations in the shape of proposals for nonviolent policy responses, which can be seen as peace initiatives. In this, such reporting may be consistent with PVE approaches that seek to explain violence from a range of perspectives—from broad historical and socio-economic trends to the specific circumstances of individuals and groups, and why they come to support and join VE organisations.

The Peace Journalism model is typically operationalised in relevant research by treating the above orientations as a set of headings, and allotting particular dyadic distinctions of representation, in samples of news reporting about particular conflicts, under each heading—a method pioneered by Lee and Maslog (2005). This process is guided by at-

tention to the conflict milieu—and in this case the particularities of violent extremism in Afghanistan, manifested in IS–KP—considered with reference to established precepts of conflict analysis—to pinpoint the differentials of newsgathering and story-telling that are likely to produce the strongest interactions in audience meaning-making.

As Nohrstedt and Ottosen point out, “journalistic products are perceived to carry and contain meanings on several levels. These cannot be collapsed into a single ‘manifest content’ level” (Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2011, pp. 224–25). In all studies where the PJ model is used as the basis for deriving evaluative criteria to use in content analysis, therefore, some further allowance is made for the discursive context into which the sample of reporting would have entered, and how the distinctions ‘caught’ by such criteria would be likely to influence audience responses.

Dyrstad and Hillesund (2020) use comparative survey research to show how a combination of “grievances. . . actual or perceived [and] lack of political efficacy” predicates “individual support for political violence”, with particular reference to appeals for support by non-state armed groups. This, therefore, influenced coding for the third of the Peace Journalism orientations, “people-oriented”, to emphasise reporting that highlighted political and/or social agency being exerted from sub-elite levels, with people taking matters into their own hands rather than simply appealing for intervention by authorities, or indeed by violent groups. Such initiatives could be seen as supplying some actual or prospective political efficacy in respect of grievances, and therefore as a community resource to safeguard against the messaging of violent extremism.

Since the dynamics of cause and effect in any conflict can be differentiated according to gender, White urges, in programming designed to create community resources to prevent violent extremism, a “focus. . . on the socio-culturally constructed nature of gender roles, and how the unequal socialisation of these roles can. . . be challenged” (White 2022, p. 588). Contestation over these processes of construction and socialisation has been highlighted by monitoring groups in Afghanistan, with women’s presence in public life characterised as having changed “from almost everywhere to almost nowhere” since the Taliban takeover in 2021³. Hence the PJ distinctions were applied with attention to issues in the construction and socialisation of gender roles, particularly as they affected participation by women in any form of public life—and indeed this fed through into the biggest single theme of material in the reporting by trainees. A particularly poignant note within media came with a story about women journalists whose radio station was taken off air—following a process of negotiation with the new authorities—before being put back on, albeit without the music broadcasting that previously accompanied the factual content⁴.

The gendered impact of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan will doubtless manifest itself in many contexts, and take time to evolve. A corollary of the exclusion of women from consequential social roles outside the private sphere may be to tilt women’s participation towards non-state armed groups, thus adding to the germinal layers of violent extremism. Margolin notes that, when Islamic State emerged “from the ashes of Al Qaida in Iraq”, it used female suicide bombers while US troops were still in the country. “The use of women in combat roles” had a dual purpose: “both shaming men into action and allowing for women’s participation under special circumstances” (Margolin 2019, p. 44). However, this changed after the end of US combat operations, she notes, with women then explicitly encouraged, by ideologues of the group, to remain in the home. For Afghanistan, then—with a persistent threat from an offshoot of the same organisation, Islamic State–Khorasan Province, or IS–KP, but now similarly emptied of international forces—the auguries, with regard to the impact on gender roles, are mixed. However, this specific issue, of women’s potential participation in violent extremist activity, did not crop up as story material of interest to the journalists in the training programme.

3. Limitations

Results from the comparative content analysis could be expected to show how far Afghan journalists could change the content of the news they produce, to incorporate more

Peace Journalism, under the controlled conditions of a sustained intervention in training and mentorship, in which they participated with permission and support from their editors and employers. Such a study cannot, by itself, indicate the likelihood of a change in news content overall, even from participating journalists, following the conclusion of such an intervention.

[Shoemaker and Reese \(1996\)](#) model influences on news content in a “hierarchy”, arranged on five nested (though often overlapping) levels: (1) personal influences, operating directly on the individual journalist; (2) professional influences (reporting routines and news values); (3) organizational influences (economic imperatives and editorial control); (4) extra-media influences (including threats and intimidation from state and non-state actors); and (5) broader societal influences. The nature of a training course, intended to take effect by resourcing participants to exert greater individual agency in their professional work, points to levels (1) and (2) of this model as fields of influence, but not the other levels.

Another significant factor, which could be expected to influence the conduct and content of news—and therefore required allowances to be made in the coding—concerned the working lives of journalists amid a rapidly tightening set of constraints on media freedom. A report released in 2023 by the International Federation of Journalists⁵ referenced “unprecedented restrictions on journalists and media”, and cited a survey by its Afghan affiliate union, according to which just 292 out of 579 media outlets previously operating in the country were still in business. “Women journalists have been especially hard hit”, it went on, and “80 percent of women journalists in Afghanistan lost their jobs”.

The IFJ report specified the modalities of restriction on journalism:

“Numerous players within the Taliban regularly intervene in media affairs. The Ministry of Information and Culture (MoIC), the Government Media Information Center (GMIC), and the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue (MPVV) have all issued vague rules with unclear legal bases or consequences for the media. . . Other rules call on media to refer to the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”, respect Islamic values, and coordinate reporting with state overseers. Meanwhile, General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) operatives have cracked down on the press, by watching, detaining, and beating journalists and visiting newsrooms to threaten workers and complain about coverage.”

Taken together, these factors were built into the coding, with an additional indicator denoted by the concept of a “framework of understanding” (FWU). Many items, in both the pre-training and post-training samples, included interview material with non-elite sources to score in the people-orientation of the PJ model, which previous research has shown is the most widespread aspect of take-up among alumni of such courses as in the present example ([Lynch and Tiripelli 2022](#)). [Lynch and McGoldrick \(2005\)](#) characterise the training or pedagogical issue, arising from such a practice, in the following terms:

“The challenge is to convey their *connection* with the conflict, and the outlook for its likely development, in the course of a news story. . . you need. . . to construct a *framework of understanding*, in which the relevance of new perspectives to the story. . . can be made clear” ([Lynch and McGoldrick 2005](#), pp. 165–66, emphasis in the original). To make the relevance clear, in the repressive context spelled out in the IFJ report, of sub-elite initiatives to support the visibility or social participation of women, would carry obvious risks. In the coding, therefore, especial care was taken to detect even the most inferential signalling of this kind, and denote it through adopting a separate Framework of Understanding indicator.

“Peace journalism is supported by framing theory”, [Lee and Maslog \(2005\)](#) point out, and [Entman \(1993\)](#) indicates an active role for framing with the formulation of “making salient” the archetypal factors of “problem definition, moral evaluation and causal explanation”, on the one hand, as validating different “treatment recommendations”, on the other. To make them salient, he continues, requires more than the provision of “scattered oppositional facts” to “challenge a dominant frame”, thereby enabling and activating critical thinking, in fulfilment of the PJM heading of truth-orientation. The samples both before and after the training and mentorship programme included some stories that merely presented

‘feature material’, typically about ordinary Afghans going about their daily business—in a generalized social context, to be sure, but without explicit connecting content between them. So, these were coded at 0 for FWU, whereas stories that did make such explicit connections were coded at 1.

4. Results and Discussion

The 30 participating journalists in the training and mentorship programme were asked to submit up to five articles each, as examples of their work on any aspect of conflict (broadly defined) from before the training, for analysis. This yielded a baseline sample of 80 articles, with the oldest dating from 2017, up to and including the period since the Taliban takeover in 2021.

Following the training workshop and with mentorship from trainers, they then created, published, and/or broadcast a total of 85 articles between them, in which they attempted to apply the principles presented in the training to stories on any aspect of conflict (again, broadly defined). These were gathered and submitted for comparative analysis, using the same evaluative criteria. Table 2 shows results from the content analysis before the training and mentorship programme, and Table 3 shows results from content analysis after the programme.

Table 2. War Journalism and Peace Journalism coding, before training. Pre-training n = 80.

Criterion	Score	Criterion	Score
War/violence	20	Peace/conflict	8
Propaganda	18	Truth	14
Elite	22	People	33
Victory	13	Solution	12
Total	73		67
WJ quotient	23%	PJ quotient	21%
FWU Y	44		
FWU N	36		

Table 3. War Journalism and Peace Journalism coding, after training. Post-training n = 85.

Criterion	Score	Criterion	Score
War/violence	9	Peace/conflict	52
Propaganda	3	Truth	40
Elite	6	People	62
Victory	0	Solution	29
Total	18		183
WJ quotient	5%	PJ quotient	57%
FWU Y	68		
FWU N	17		

In the pre-training sample, n = 80, so the maximum score for each category, WJ and PJ, was 320. Overall, this sample showed a WJ quotient of 73, or 23%, and a PJ quotient of 67, or 21%. Under half of these (45%) showed how the material being reported on fitted in with broader themes of conflict, in a framework of understanding.

In the post-training sample, n = 85, so the maximum score for each category, WJ and PJ, was 340. Overall, this sample showed a WJ quotient of 18, or 5%, and a PJ quotient of 183, or 57%. Fully 68 out of the sample of 85 (or 80%) constructed a framework of understanding

in which connections, between the sources for the stories, their words and deeds, and larger or more general issues of conflict, were clearly indicated.

From a comparison of coding between the two raters, Scott's pi was calculated at 0.91, indicating a high level of agreement. For comparison, in the Lee and Maslog study (Lee and Maslog 2005) quoted above, "a coding of 100 stories produced Scott's pi of between 0.76 and 0.93", on a range of different dyads.

4.1. Pre-Training Examples

Nearly all the trainees were performing some aspects of PJ in their existing reporting, chiefly in the people-orientation. The material covered a wide range of different story types and media, from amateur-style (possibly smartphone) video pictures stitched together in rudimentary edits, often with no reporter voiceover, to professionally shot and edited longer packages.

Among the more technically rudimentary pieces in the sample was a video piece of just over a minute's duration about an Art Centre in Nangarhar province offering, on a voluntary basis, free education for orphans, including "girls up to the age of 12"—the oldest that are presently allowed to attend school under the Taliban.

It edited together statements from two pupils, a boy and a girl, then the centre's Director, who explained the initiative to camera. There was no reporter voiceover. It could, then, be assessed as a piece of PJ, in the domains of people- and peace-orientation, since it is contributing to quotidian security. A positive score was allotted for a framework of understanding. The example is worth dwelling on because it illustrated the subtlety of signalling that could be deemed, in the codebook and adjusted for context, to 'count' in this respect. The girl pupil was interviewed in front of a background that prominently included a picture of a dove carrying an olive branch, perched on the barrel of a gun and causing it to bend downwards. As Fahmy and Neumann note, "the framing that occurs through visuals is. . . potentially more effective in communicating specific interpretation of news events than framing that occurs via print and/or in written and spoken parts of broadcast news" (Fahmy and Neumann 2012, p. NP4).

It is reasonable to speculate that this visual juxtaposition, along with the evident joy and excitement of the young girl as she spoke about her studies, could lead audiences to respond by referencing this situation to the controversy over girls' school attendance at the secondary stage. Whether consciously or not, that would potentially enter the process of meaning-making. Any who viewed the article after 27 March 2023 would also most likely be aware of the arrest of Matiullah Wesa, an "education activist. . . [who] helped to set up or restore schools. And along the way, emboldened whole communities to keep pushing for greater education opportunities" (Latifi 2023).

A report of a car bomb in Logar province, dating from the early days after the Taliban takeover in 2021, was allotted a War Journalism point for violence-orientation, but also some Peace Journalism points. These included a people-orientation, as local citizens spoke about the impact on them and their community, but also the provincial governor, Abdul Qayum Rahimi, offering his analysis of the nature and extent of Taliban responsibility for the blast, blame for which was not explicitly apportioned, in the piece, to any one group. Instead, in general terms, the governor said: "Talib is a ceiling and different groups work under this ceiling like Jesh Mohammad to Al-Qaida, Tajik militants, Uzbek militants, Kazakh, Arora, Pakistanis all are those groups that fight in Logar and empower the Taliban"—thus scoring positively under the supplementary indication for a framework of understanding.

This is an issue that clearly needs careful handling and response. On the one hand, pointing the finger at ethnic minorities can clearly be dangerous. On the other, the governor was not alone in raising the alarm over the need for the Taliban authorities to take concrete steps to distance and dissociate themselves from non-state armed groups, to allow clearer and more effective policies to counter violent extremism. In a sample piece that included a television interview with EU Special Representative Tomas Niklasson, the latter stated:

“Afghanistan’s USD\$9 billion capital that is outside Afghanistan, this capital has been frozen due to the type of takeover of power by Taliban. It’s a normal procedure. No other country has tried to make the frozen capital closed to Afghanistan, but USA is the leading country in this regard. The reasons for freezing this money are these: that there isn’t any description of Afghanistan Bank independence, there isn’t any description of the Afghanistan Bank for preventing the use of this money for terrorist activities, and this money cannot be given to Afghanistan until an assurance is provided in this regard. You can always see a half empty glass, but I see it as a half glass of water and if Taliban take reasonable measures, some amount of this money will be released and all the money should be transferred back to Afghanistan in the future”.

Some of the submitted sample material dated from before the Taliban takeover. A report from RTA Afghanistan, the state broadcaster, offered a highly professional piece of television War Journalism: a facility with a military patrol shown discovering and defusing enemy munitions secreted by Taliban forces in or near Kabul. A transcript of a television studio discussion from Sediqa Faramarz referred to Abdullah Abdullah as leading negotiations on behalf of the Afghan government, and US and UK troops entering the country. Both arguably exemplified the dominant War Journalism settings of reporting under the Republic, as recorded in content analysis by [Lynch and Freear \(2023\)](#). A typical excerpt from the latter showed a victory orientation:

“The First Vice President of the Republic says that we will not accept any kind of conditions and any kind of compromise of Taliban rule to the people of Afghanistan, and we will not agree to any kind of deal and conditions that the Taliban will comply with. For any reason, we will not accept the peace of Taliban for the people of Afghanistan, and we will not agree to any deal dictated by the Taliban”.

By way of contrast, a more recent submission from the same trainee, though still in the pre-training sample, contained transcripts of several video news stories illustrating social problems and challenges, with sources recommending cooperation, even efforts to engender peace, as solutions. These adopted a strong watchdog role, pointing up situations where governmental action under the Islamic Emirate departed from its apparent commitments, or was criticised by international organisations, but also giving credit for a successful effort by Afghanistan to reduce corruption, as reflected by its improving position in the ‘league table’ compiled by Transparency International, since the change of regime.

4.2. Post-Training Examples

The following articles from the ‘after’ sample were among those with noteworthy elements of content, based on the observations above.

A story for Deutsche Welle, ‘Scholars’, aired on 26 May 2023 as the training was still underway, exemplified several aspects of PJ. It represented an issue of conflict—girls’ education—over which many parties’ views are aired, including those of eminent Islamic scholars but also a student and political commentators. The representation was not entirely dyadic, since the government’s position was nuanced, in some ways contradictory and possibly evolving. The article heard from sources about the impact on national productivity of keeping girls from being educated. It was conflict-oriented, people-oriented, truth-oriented, and solution-oriented. It constructed a framework of understanding in which everyday lived reality was connected to broader conflict issues. Those criticising the Taliban’s rescission of education rights for girls beyond elementary level appeared in roles allotted by Fahmy and Neumann, in a study of visual effects in news about conflict, as belonging to the Peace Journalism end of the spectrum, being “negotiators or demonstrators. . . [rather than] victims [or] belligerents” ([Fahmy and Neumann 2012](#), p. NP 17).

A story titled ‘Carpet’, for a television channel, Khama News, showed girls forced out of school who now worked as weavers in a nearby factory. It carried the now familiar

line that the government was working towards re-opening schools for girls, which, again, provided a solution orientation. The comments from the girls themselves, which included an observation that the schools had now been closed for 600 days, may be interpreted in context as truth-orientation, prompting and enabling the reader to see through propaganda. This is mentioned here as an example of the subtle inferential coding required to detect salient framing content in the process of meaning-making in the Afghan context of 2023. To select such an example for attention, in the context of a news channel, may reflect the resourcefulness required of the journalist operating in constrained conditions, typical of non-Western settings, and adopting an approach that Hussain characterises as “critical pragmatism. . . [which] focuses on practice and at the same time, is aware of the structures that contribute to systemic inequalities in the outcomes. To ensure more purposeful activities, it stresses on critical reflections to develop better solutions to the social problems” (Hussain 2022, p. 117).

A transcript from an Azadi Radio newsmagazine programme showed how international agencies, including the World Food Programme, were being forced to suspend their operations in Afghanistan, blaming interference by the Taliban authorities. The segment was scored positively in the Peace Journalism coding categories of being peace-and-conflict oriented, by explaining backgrounds and contexts, including the economic disruption brought about by the change of government; people-oriented, by interviewing social actors from sub-elite levels; and solution-oriented, due to the time given over to allowing these interviewees to call for specific policy responses to alleviate the situation. It constructed a framework of understanding in which their perspectives could be seen as directly relevant to broader conflict issues.

4.3. Coding for Gender

The gradual withdrawal of US and allied forces starting in May 2021 enabled the Taliban’s military takeover of the entire country by August of that year, thus reducing the level of direct violence and bringing peace to the country, on “the most popular (Western) view. . . as an absence of war [which is] also the primary dictionary definition” (Rummel 1981). This, in turn, delivered security, but only of a kind which “assumes a short-term outlook and presents physical threats as the main risks, largely overlooking the long-term drivers of insecurity”, according to a critical expert group in the UK. It “proposes to respond by extending control over the strategic environment, achieved principally through offensive military capabilities, a superpower alliance, and restrictions on civil liberties” (Ammerdown Group 2016, p. 1).

Reardon identifies this as a distinctively gendered view, since it sustains “the present highly militarized, war prone, patriarchal nation state system” (Reardon and Snauwaert 2015, p. 112). As an alternative, she shows how peace and social activism by women, in a range of contexts, bequeath a concept of human security as “in essence the conditions that make possible the experience and expectation of well-being” (ibid., p. 117).

This connects with the typical concerns of such activism, which “stem from. . . conditions of quotidian security for families and communities. . . They have been active in environmental protection movements, efforts to overcome and compensate for poverty, the human rights movement for gender equality and rights of the excluded and oppressed” (Reardon and Snauwaert 2015, p. 120).

In the post-training sample, such concerns are prominent, notably over the lack of access to education for girls of secondary school age, but also including the unmet humanitarian needs of the Afghan population. These issues can be seen, therefore, as elements of a consciously re-gendered security concept, with salience to the Afghan context.

Indeed, the connection is made in some of the articles between provision for women’s rights, on the one hand, and protecting communities from a recrudescence of non-state armed groups, on the other. In an episode of Shamshad News, submitted by trainee Sabir Khan, reports from an international conclave quoted a Russian spokesperson as criticising Western countries for “isolating” Afghanistan. It was “not easy to fight against terrorism

alone”, the programme voice-over observed. To the extent that this isolation is linked with Taliban refusal to allow women to work for agencies in the country, the programme interviewed an analyst, Shir Hasan Hasan, who commented: “The Taliban should take themselves out of isolation to succeed in this regard and they should work on national and international legitimacy, they should work on Afghanistan’s constitution, they should work on the freedom of political and civil activities, and they should work on women’s rights”.

Research in Afghan communities before the Taliban takeover highlighted “everyday peace indicators” (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017), or community-sourced indicators of change, perceived as important by the people themselves, according to a USIP study based on FGD data. A thousand participants from 18 villages in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar and Kunar provinces nominated, as a community indicator for peace while countering violent extremism, “the visibility of women and girls—especially seeing them going to school and traveling to the market. This indicator was universally prioritized by men, women, and youth interviewees, implying that women’s mobility is equated with feelings of security across demographics” (Urwin and Ahmadi 2018, p. 3). The clear consonance with Reardon’s emphasis on the “quotidian” in a re-gendered definition of security represents another sign that journalism by the Afghan trainees, after training, was constructing and exploring a set of security issues as yet untackled by the country’s new rulers, who were, in some cases, credibly presented as making them worse.

The new Emirati authorities could deploy force around their territory where necessary, including in ‘crackdowns’ on rare open fronts of internal dissent—but only at the risk of overriding the everyday expectation and experience of wellbeing, and exacerbating the long-term drivers of insecurity. Again, the experiences of women, in such security contexts, could be seen as a touchstone. Latifi (2022) quotes Sadullah, a villager from Panjshir province, on the impact of the Taliban armed security response to the NRF insurgency: “Sadullah said he had tried to make the best of the situation back in Panjshir, but the presence of up to 150 Taliban fighters in their village made resuming normal life impossible. ‘We are a traditional people’, he explained. ‘Our women didn’t feel comfortable going out with strange Taliban fighters around’”.

As noted above, Peace Journalism is “supported by framing theory” (Lee and Maslog 2005). The dominant context-specific, gender-adjusted framing according to the elements in Entman’s formulation (Entman 1993)—to “make salient. . . [the] moral evaluation, problem definition, causal explanation and treatment recommendation” in the representation of a typical contested or ambiguous social scenario—can be read, from the post-training articles, in the following terms:

- A moral evaluation that depriving girls and women of opportunities is wrong;
- A problem definition that includes violation of their human rights, as well as more pragmatic, consequentialist issues such as alienating the international community whose support is needed for both humanitarian relief and security, and leading to increased outward migration, thus costing Afghanistan human capital and talent;
- A causal explanation that these problems are connected with doctrinaire decisions by the Emirati authorities;
- Treatment recommendations that involve changes in policy, with not-infrequent signs that debate among the Taliban rulers is underway, and also referred to Islamic scholarship.

4.4. Implications for Future Media Development Aid

Trainees produced a strong and impressive body of Peace Journalism after the training. This shows a “benefit applied”: a key indicator, in a proposal from a senior practitioner Alan Davis of the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, in monitoring and evaluating interventions in media development aid. Such initiatives all contain a “benefit transferred”, he writes; what is more valuable is when trainees then change the content of their reporting to reflect the new ideas. A third category is the “benefit beyond” or the expected influence on audience meaning-making, source behaviours, and/or societal development as a whole (Davis 2008, pp. 90–91).

This may have specific benefits for communities at risk from violent extremism such as the activities—and messaging to match—promulgated by such groups as IS–KP. Communication by such groups is akin to marketing, a recent policy guide by USAID notes. However, it is likely that ‘counter-narratives’ are ineffective⁶. Instead, “communication strategies should convey accessible alternatives that dilute the potency of violent extremists’ arguments while creating positive identities, opportunities for engagement, and expressions of agency”⁷—that relate to the concerns and priorities of people, and are thereby closely akin to the orientations of Peace Journalism and the coding adopted to operationalise them in the Afghan context of 2023.

How far can this Peace Journalism training, for journalists in the new Afghanistan, afford insights capable of informing future interventions, and capable of taking effect by delivering benefits both applied and beyond? Lynch and Freear (2023) cite evidence from grey literature of specialist agencies being forced to adapt as international support for the media sector was “drawn down”, in the early 2000s. Some such aid continued to be available, albeit under the Islamic Republic government, and supplemented by paid advertising on behalf of international organisations.

Afghan journalism and media may therefore offer continuing affordances for Peace Journalism training. Afghan journalists interviewed for the antecedent study “wanted to do more Peace Journalism” (Lynch and Freear 2023, np). Their role perceptions proved consonant with earlier findings by Mitra, who interviewed Afghan photojournalists, finding them motivated by a “wish to depict positive, peaceful Afghanistan”. This showed “concurrence with PJ norms and point[ed] to the opportunities for acceptance of PJ” (Mitra 2017, p. 23). In both of these studies, therefore, Afghan journalists’ role perceptions gravitated towards those of journalists in developing countries more generally. In the collaborative Worlds of Journalism study, in which over 6000 journalists, from 60 countries, were interviewed, the single most widespread ethical precept was “non-involvement” in the stories covered, or detached ‘reporting of the facts’.

Early Western critics of Peace Journalism, such as the then BBC correspondent David Loyn, rejected it as an attempt to “prescribe” methods of reporting conflict—an approach that risked, he averred, creating a “new orthodoxy. . . [something that would be] uniquely unhelpful” to reporters in the field. Rather, Loyn argued, they should be left to decide how to report on a case-by-case basis, by empirical methods, save in certain circumstances—such as those covered by libel laws—where specified activities are ‘proscribed’ (Loyn 2008, pp. 53–54). In the WoJ study, however, majority-world participants—drawn from countries in east Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America—tended to a different view. Their responses revealed ethical precepts which emphasised values of “social intervention, national development and educating people” (Kalyango et al. 2017, p. 576).

The International Federation of Journalists report⁸, referenced earlier, raises the alarm over a rupture in the system of support for Afghan journalists, catalysed by the collapse of the Republic and its replacement by the Taliban Islamic Emirate, with the consequent humanitarian crisis in the country now dominating the attention of aid agencies:

“Though some media aid implementers are finding ways to continue working in Afghanistan, the overall system for news organisations to solicit support from donors and implementers has broken down. Donor governments are focused on diplomacy and humanitarian relief rather than media development”.

At the time of writing, the United Nations was awaiting, from the Secretary General on a mandate directly from the Security Council, “forward-looking recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach [in the country] among relevant political, humanitarian, and development actors, within and outside of the United Nations”⁹. These were due by mid-November 2023, with hopes high among some in the sector for the inclusion of a strategy to ensure “public access to information”, as called for in Goal 16, Target 10 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Meanwhile, some interventions were already underway, having been devised specifically for implementation in the newly restricted media space under the Taliban, and focused

on conflict-sensitive or Peace Journalism content. UNESCO announced a new partnership with the European Union in late 2022, to:

“Provide support to Afghan media outlets in the production of conflict-sensitive, humanitarian, health and educational public interest content. The project will benefit at least 6 million Afghan citizens, with a specific focus on reporting addressed at women, girls and youth. UNESCO will also be partnering with civil society organizations and local journalists’ unions to train an estimated six hundred journalists on conflict-sensitive reporting”¹⁰.

The results of this research, showing how such training can lead to changes in the content of news produced by Afghan journalists, suggest the potential of such initiatives to yield measurable results.

The IFJ, for its part, called on “aid [to be] directed towards independent media. International supporters can facilitate communication among Afghan media outlets and encourage the strengthening of inter-organisational associations. Though such groups, media and CSOs can form a united front to engage both the Taliban and international donor community”.

Results from the comparative content analysis of articles by the same journalists before and after undergoing training in Peace Journalism indicate the potential impact of such interventions at the level of a media approach to be applied, and to catalyse new creative practices, awareness, and critical reflexivity of particular importance amidst the highly emotive words and deeds of violent extremists. On a second level, changes to journalists’ professional environment, stimulating new techniques for fieldwork and news production, can sustain and spread the impact of the first. This can, in turn, lead to new relations with sources and other social groups, collaborating to create “public records of truth” (Waisbord 2019, p. 4), surfacing hitherto under-reported voices and issues. On a fourth level, Davis’ notion of a “benefit beyond” may be discerned in a public furnished with access to information that prompts and enables their appreciation of nonviolent policy responses to conflict issues foregrounded by ambiguous causal scenarios, identified as a crucial component of both communication for sustainable development and community resilience against communication strategies by groups associated with violent extremism.

Peace Journalism training can be effective, therefore, even among a group of participating trainees who face significant constraints in their working lives and pressure on a range of issues evident in the everyday lives of their readers and audiences, which present themselves for journalistic attention and coverage. With ongoing mentorship and encouragement to adapt the PJ approach to the exigencies of conflict, discernible extra value can be added to the supply of news reaching publics who remain vulnerable to the messaging of authoritarian rulers and violent extremists alike. Such interventions can deliver benefits both applied in news coverage itself and potentially beyond the training to enable cognitive resources to be developed and brought to bear in communities.

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Notes

- 1 United Nations Development Programme (2016) 'Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity—A development response to addressing radicalization and violent extremism' <https://www.undp.org/publications/preventing-violent-extremism-through-inclusive-development-and-promotion-tolerance-and-respect-diversity> (accessed on 5 January 2024).
- 2 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-enduring-duel-islamic-state-khorasans-survival-under-afghanistans-new-rulers/> (accessed on 5 January 2024).
- 3 Mona Chalabi: 'Women in Afghanistan: from almost everywhere to almost nowhere', UN Women (15 August 2023): <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/08/women-in-afghanistan-from-almost-everywhere-to-almost-nowhere> (accessed on 5 January 2024).
- 4 Sight Magazine: Afghan Women-run Radio Resumes Broadcasts After Shutdown, April 8: <https://www.sightmagazine.com.au/news/29679-afghan-women-run-radio-resumes-broadcasts-after-shutdown> (accessed on 5 January 2024).
- 5 South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022–23: Afghanistan, Standing Strong, International Federation of Journalists: <https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR22-23/afghanistan/> (accessed on 5 January 2024).
- 6 Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies—A review of the evidence, Dr Kate Ferguson, Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research, University of Cambridge, 2016; Through the Looking Glass: Assessing the Evidence Base for P/CVE Communications, Michael Jones, RUSI 2020; Preventive Media and Communication, Freear and Glazzard, RUSI Journal, 2020.
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