

# Exploring Peace Journalism and Interactive Narratives in Finnish Online Newspapers<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The mainstream news media is frequently criticized for presenting news in a bipolar and superficial manner, often choosing sensationalism over practicalities, and escalation over solution-oriented goals. The peace journalism model offers a different approach to news gathering, collation and coverage by presenting alternative sources and outcomes. This paper examines the online journalism frames used by the *Helsinki Times* and *Helsingin Sanomat* in a news report on an immigrant taxi driver in Finland. It demonstrates that on one hand, the current model in *The Helsinki Times* is one closely aligned to peace journalism, and in *Helsingin Sanomat*, there are signs of trans-media reporting, supporting the hypothesis that in the digital age, the use of socially-responsible interactive news narratives may be able to engage more people in critical thinking, and be more effective in fostering improved inter-cultural relations. However, there is a need to create a format that allows both functions to be optimally utilized in order to enhance distribution and reception practices.

**Keywords:** peace journalism, interactive storytelling, immigrant, newspapers

## 1 CONSIDERING THE FINNISH NEWS MODEL

In today's economic climate, it is too easy to focus on what does not work in the media and who is responsible for reacting or not reacting. In 2014, the Finnish National Broadcaster (YLE) has indicated plans to dismiss 185 employees, KSF Media will decrease their staff complement by 50 positions (of which 30 are journalists) and 130 people will be retrenched from the Finnish magazine company, Sanomat. Journalists, editors and public commentators argue about what could or could not have been done, and what needs to change. In the humdrum of critique and calls for reformation, one element of the debate seems forgotten: what is it that Finnish media does well, and how may that be enhanced going forward?

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that this is work in progress and as such, this working paper is Version 1 of an ongoing study.

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This pilot phase considers news frames suggested by peace journalism theorists (see: Lynch & Galtung 2010; Lynch 2014), and compares those notions to an actual report in the *Helsinki Times* and *Helsingin Sanomat*. While often mistakenly envisaged to apply purely to crisis situations, peace journalism is also an effective model to employ in order to decrease the potential for violence and conflict in everyday situations and in apparently ‘peaceful’ communities. In such cases, the conflict in question may arise from xenophobic reactions or politically conservative tenets. This alternative model of reporting allows the reader to become better informed and culturally sensitized to the ‘other’. It does so by creating a forum for a multitude of voices to be heard and perspectives expressed.

Simultaneously, the use of new media technologies should allow for more engaged interaction with online media content there by creating a critical and participatory audience. This research intends to examine the possibility of introducing an online interactive narrative news framework that allows the user to learn more about various current affairs through self-driven exploration, enhances through access to a wider variety of sources and information. This exploratory paper focusses on the conceptual framework that underpins the study.

## **2 PEACE JOURNALISM AND A GLOBAL STANDARD OF REPORTING CONFLICT**

Peace journalism theory offers an alternative means of distributing information to the public in order to increase understanding, empathy and solution-oriented responses. Previous studies that have examined a number of news reports in several countries have found these elements to be lacking in mainstream reporting (Hyde-Clarke 2011, 2012; Lynch 2014). Instead there is an overwhelming reliance on the use of expert sources and a general lack of analytical context.

In their professional capacity, journalists attempt to follow a series of guidelines that will allow them to file ‘good’ (Lynch 2010, 2014) and ‘balanced’ (Hackett 2011: 38) reports – with reference to a shared goal to strive for objectivity and accuracy in the public’s interest. However, the challenges they face are rife. Due to time and space constraints, there is a need to exercise selection and omission. Editorial policies, as well as political and economic forces, also impact on how a story is told. Increasingly, analysts discover a pattern that emphasizes “official sources over ‘people sources’, events over process, and violence over peace” (Lynch & McGoldrick 2010: 91). Thus, despite its contentious reception by critics who claim it to be nothing more than positivism with social responsibility underpinnings (see Hyde-Clarke 2012 for a summary of these critiques), the discussion and debate about the feasibility of revisiting existing practices as suggested by those advocating the peace journalism framework remains firmly in the public sphere.

Recently labelled as a global standard for reporting conflict (Lynch 2014), peace journalism is heralded as a “deliberative creative strategy conceived as a specific response... an insurgent approach” (Lynch 2014: 36, 38). In this model of journalism, the

insurgent refers to truth-, people- and solution-orientation. The aim is to create a society that will derive meaning through inclusive, critical debates. In a series of experiments in five countries, Lynch and McGoldrick were able to prove that audiences were indeed susceptible to peace journalism reports. They demonstrated greater empathy to those affected or involved in crisis situations (McGoldrick 2011), and welcomed solution-oriented coverage. Audiences reported feelings of empowerment as they were able to discern their own understanding of a situation, rather than being treated as passive recipients of simplistic versions of reality. By incorporating context, background and a variety of perspectives, news content seemed more credible to the research groups (Lynch 2014).

In order for it to be implemented in mainstream media, peace journalism requires a transformation of existing news routines and professional norms – although changing practices alone may not necessarily bring about the ‘revolution’ intended (Keeble 2010). This has already been demonstrated by the shift to accommodate online media. On the surface, the Internet provides an interesting possibility for the development of a global peace journalism model that could ultimately create a revised global news culture (Keeble 2010: 55). The increase in citizen journalism as well as the blogosphere serve to challenge and supplement mainstream news channels. As Rodny-Gumede (2012: 59) argues: “sources of information are the lifeblood of journalists”. These days, those sources are increasingly found online or through social media. However, the reality is that this wealth of opinion may not assist in diversifying the choice of those cited. The difficulty facing journalists is not the number of sources available but the credibility and authenticity of those sources. There is now greater emphasis on sorting the legitimate comments from those that are less valid (Rodny-Gumede 2012: 62). As a result, it is not unusual to find that even with the wide range of voices available to them, journalists continue to rely on reputable organizations and recognizable figures – in other words, the very same sources used in traditional, conventional reporting: the experts. It appears that very little has changed in this regard.

At the same time, there is also the realization that the measurably shorter attention span of the audience in news consumption means that traditional news media reports are unlikely to sustain in-depth investigative and analytical reports (Lynch & McGoldrick 2010: 87). This has been exacerbated by online user habits where people drift quickly from one site to another choosing information most likely to reflect their own perspectives and interests. The need therefore may not necessarily only be in changing news routines and practices in media organisations, but also to supply cues and prompts that enable the audience to negotiate their own experience as critical and informed ‘readers’.

This brings us to the first core question of this exploratory research: is it possible to consider an interactive peace journalism model?

### **3 PEACE JOURNALISM AS AN INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE**

Online technologies create opportunities for individuals to exercise greater levels of agency (taking action and adapting future actions on the outcomes of that experience) through selection processes and levels of engagement with media content. It is therefore

entirely possible that by creating positive experiences of news consumption that is both inspirational and innovation, the public will begin to demonstrate increased critical analysis around current affairs, and over time, there may be attitude shifts in relation to specific topics, such as the 'other'. In order to test this hypothesis, the research will consider the use of interactive narratives within the peace journalism model.

Narrative-centred environments can create a foundation for active participation and discovery learning to occur (Lee et al. 2011). In narrative theory, a character must be believable, and embedded in the plot. As the plot presents circumstances to which the character should react, there is a need for agency as a selection of choice must be demonstrated to further the narrative. There is thus a symbiotic relationship between the character and the plot, and thus in order for interactive narratives to be successful, attention must be given to both (Young 2000). Thus, both constructs, narrative and agency, are required to create an interactive experience that is self-determined and purposeful (Lindgren & McDaniel 2012). Simultaneously, in order for the character to contribute to the outcomes of the plot, some form of problem-solving must occur (Lee et al. 2011) - and it is the combination of these three factors that create effective learning and engagement with the content presented.

If one applies this reasoning to the peace journalism model, then there is a need to give both the subject in the news report, and the consumer of that information, agency through carefully selected encounters of the narrative. This means that subjects cannot simply be depicted as the 'victim' or the 'villain', but rather as complex individuals who are influenced by events or circumstances, and share a willingness to alter these realities through constructive means. In this instance, alternative discourses are introduced and the subject is literally given 'voice'. In order to best understand and engage with the subject and the circumstances, the audience/reader needs to also exert agency and interact with that narrative. In this case, elements such as media-clips, drop down lists, links and commentary columns are some of the more rudimentary tools already in place on many sites. But how best to couple those instruments, and other possibly better tools, to maximize the consumer's information experience?

These elements are already being investigated. A study by Lindgren & McDaniel (2012: 352) found that online content with an explicit narrative and clear requirements for student agency increased levels of critical comprehension, improved academic skills and an increased rating of personal development. A number of socio-cultural organisations have already started to experiment in this field. The FearNot! Campaign uses storytelling to discuss bullying in schools, and through the use of virtual agents suggests appropriate coping strategies while building empathetic relationships (Lee et al. 2011). This study seeks to contribute to existing literature by exploring a slightly more nuanced research question: Is it possible to replicate these results in the online news domain?

#### **4 A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF AN ONLINE NEWS REPORT**

It is clear when doing a cursory study of an online article that appears in both newspapers online, that a larger study on Finnish news frames and online presentation could be

most advantageous and certainly needed. If one were to briefly compare the *Helsinki Times* article online (<http://www.helsingitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/domestic/11720-customers-reluctant-to-get-in-a-taxi-with-a-dark-skinned-driver.html>) with the *Helsingin Sanomat* version of the same story (<http://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/a1408599599427>), then some common trends become apparent. The *Helsinki Times* is an excellent example of ‘shovelware’ – the online article is identical to the print article. None of the potential of an interactive news story has been utilised. There is not even space for public comment. However, in terms of content, the story exhibits a good indication of elements of peace journalism. It is people-oriented and presents additional information about the language education of taxi drivers in the city in order to better inform the reader.

Given the editorial board and focus of the newspaper, this is hardly surprising. The paper was founded by an Iranian immigrant, Alexis Kouros, which allows the possibilities for an editorial policy that encourages this alternative style of reporting to be fostered in a mainstream format. By all accounts, it is noteworthy that a newspaper that was only established in 2007 appears to be thriving in a competitive, economically challenged environment. With a circulation of just over 15 000 ([helsingitimes.fi](http://www.helsingitimes.fi)), the independent weekly has a collaborative relationship with the largest Finnish news organization, *Sanomat*, and is praised for its ability to address issues ignored or omitted by other national papers. It does have the advantage of being the only English newspaper in Finland and therefore tends to cater to a largely international, multi-cultural and diverse audience (DeWan 2008). Select news stories in the *Helsinki Times* are hence most interesting for examination in terms of peace journalism models, and audience reception, especially on the topic of immigrants in Finland.

In contrast, the *Sanomat* follows a more conventional style of reporting, but does use two online elements: an embedded media clip; as well as a commentary bar below the article. However, the use of these mechanisms could be vastly improved. The media clip is presented in an old-fashioned frame instantly recognizable as something ‘classical’ – unintentionally, the graphics may suggest that the bias is itself ‘classical’. Similarly, if one considers the news frame, the word ‘rasismia’ in the headline immediately puts the reader on the defensive. Now, instead of creating an article that could be used to educate and be solution-oriented, the headline sets up a typical ‘us versus them’ dichotomy. Even though the two actual articles are essentially the same, the headline has changed the way people read it in the *Sanomat*. This is reflected in the public commentary section where people feel the need to defend themselves rather than reflect analytically on how the situation may be improved. The public commentary, like so many other news sites, is not facilitated nor moderated by the journalist or an editor. Therefore, the interactive tools are present, but not utilized optimally, and the news frame tends to be more conflict-oriented and likely to enflame rather than educate.

It is apparent from this simple comparative analysis that more attention is needed in both newspaper articles on the enhancement of both the delivery of content and its impact on audience understanding.

## 5 FUTURE RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

In order to alter or improve existing news frames and online delivery of content, there is a need to research the feasibility and impact of the introduction of two essential components: peace journalism training; and improved facilitation of public debates. Firstly, in order for the alternative news model to work, more journalists should be reskilled in reporting techniques that may in some cases challenge existing social constructions of groups, and instead be exposed to news frames that allow for solution-oriented arguments. At the same time, there is a need for journalists to receive more training in interactive storytelling, or at the very least, to receive more input as to how certain online presentations could be enhanced and how the audience will perceive and engage with those. While critical reflection sits at the core of any media education, it is often lost in the very real pressures of time and deadlines, and more emphasis should be placed on it at all times. Research could be conducted into the reception of these workshops, their impact and whether they alter or improve content production, as well as the news audiences' consumption habits.

This has ramifications for how the dissemination of news is planned in advance of its delivery. While resource intensive, peace journalism does require the use of a broad range of voices and opinions, in the long run, better researched stories improve critical reception. The result is that these reports may take longer to collect and authenticate. Similarly, interactive narratives are based on careful consideration of which stories would be most effective in their delivery, and what elements should be emphasized over others. Planning sits at the heart of these issues. Important stories that have the potential to be conflict-driven or focused should be identified early in the process and the proper amount of planning should occur as to how the information should be shared with the public. Arguably, at the start, this process could be quite time-consuming, but over time, experience and common strategies will make it a smoother, faster method that ensure long term benefits in the public sphere. The implication is that not all reports should therefore follow the model suggested. Instead, careful consideration should be given to where the model would be most influential and effective. The selection of these is paramount to any presentation and reception study.

The final aspect to consider is the value of unedited public commentary at the end of online articles. How could this be better harnessed? Perhaps online newspapers could consider the inclusion of set discussion panels to which public could register and participate, overseen, or better, joined by the journalist or 'experts' themselves. This could heighten analysis and understanding of the issue at hand. There are many other tools to consider.

The main focus of this research suggests that it is not only the mode of delivery that should be considered when examining the impact of online news, but also the model utilized. There are signs that Finnish online media is already partially achieving this goal, however with more technical and narrative innovation, it is possible that the current model could be enhanced.

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