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Peace journalism and the usage of online sources

ABSTRACT

This article looks at reporting practices in the South African news media with regard to online sources and the realisation of peace journalism. Based on data collected from questionnaires and interviews with journalists, media scholars and media monitors in South Africa, the article explores their responses to suggestions that Internet sources are more politically biased than are traditional sources and determines both the extent to which journalists use them and the extent to which they should rely on online sources. The discussion around online sources and potential bias and even hate speech is linked up with normative ideas and debates around peace journalism in the South African news media and the promise of peace journalism through the usage of alternative news sources.

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INTRODUCTION[1]

This article examines reporting practices in the South African news media with regard to online sources and the potential realisation of peace journalism through the usage of alternative news sources. The article explores responses from journalists, media scholars and media monitoring groups to issues regarding whether journalists should rely on social media sources, and whether social media sources are more politically biased than traditional sources and whether their reporting could even amount to hate speech, and, if so, to what extent journalists should rely on such sources. This discussion is linked up with normative ideas and debates around peace journalism in the South African news media and explores whether using alternative news sources online would constitute a hindrance to or assurance of a more measured style of reporting generally and a more conflict-sensitive reporting in the South African news media.

Though the role of the news media in inciting violence and in exacerbating conflict has been widely documented, less attention has been paid to the news media's role in ameliorating and mitigating conflict (see Bratic & Schirch, 2007: 7). The growing literature and scholarship around peace journalism[2] stands as a response to this. Peace journalism is when journalists select what stories to report and how to report them in ways that "create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict" (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005: 5). Regarding journalistic practices and the day-to-day work of journalists, peace journalism also raises questions about which practices, if any, might contribute to either exacerbating or mitigating conflict. In this study, the focus is on sources and practices. It seeks to identify the sources in mainstream news media and to determine how the choice of sources used could influence media coverage in one direction or another in respect of instigating or exacerbating conflict on the one hand, and conflict mitigation on the other. Peace journalism argues that journalists must go beyond solely relying on official sources and rather look at incorporating alternative, less-quoted sources in their stories (Lynch, 2008: 39).

The data were gathered by means of a questionnaire sent out to 12 political correspondents from some of the major national media outlets in South Africa, namely the SABC, e-tv, *The Star, City Press* and *Mail & Guardian*, all with between six to ten years of experience of covering politics. The political journalists were asked questions around whether journalists should rely on social media sources, whether social media sources are more politically biased than traditional sources to the extent that their reporting could even amount to hate speech, and, if so, to what extent they should rely on such sources. Questionnaires were also sent to six media scholars and media monitors in South Africa who were asked about their own observations of how South African journalists use social media sources in political news reports, and whether they believed these sources to be more biased than other more traditional news sources. Further data were

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[1] This article is original to this edition but draws substantially on data collected for Rodny-Gumede and Hyde-Clarke (2012).

[2] The term *peace journalism* was first coined by Galtung in the 1970's (Cottle, 2006; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005).

also gathered from a round table on peace journalism held at the University of Johannesburg on 27 and 28 October 2011, comprising six media scholars and also representatives of media-monitoring groups.

1. SOURCES IN JOURNALISM AND ROUTINISATION OF PRACTICES

Sources of information are the lifeblood of journalists. They provide the essential basic information for news stories across media industries and platforms (Rudin & Ibbotson, 2002: 32). Journalism relies on accurate information, and as such cannot function without a steady provision of news from a wide range of sources. There is thus a routinisation of journalistic practices that talk directly to sources. Routine practices help journalists meet organisational needs through retaining professionalism and integrity (Tuchman, 1978 quoted in Harrison, 2006: 141). Routine practices structure journalists' relationship with their sources, their audiences, and their implementation as well as interpretation of objectivity and impartiality (Ibid). Hence routine practices in journalism help journalists balance organisational/structural pressures with the more traditional roles of journalism (Harrison, 2006: 141).

Schudson (2002: 255) quotes Sigal (1998: 25) who states: "News is not what happens, but what someone says has happened or will happen." As such, Schudson (2002: 255) says that we will have to understand who the 'someone' is, that is the sources used by journalists in their stories. As part of their routine practices, journalists build up a network of trusted sources and a network of often-quoted sources, particularly official sources. Journalists tend to be highly attuned to the bureaucratic organisation of government (Schudson, 2003: 150). Studies indicate that journalism on a day-to-day basis is tied to the interaction of journalists and government officials and bureaucracy (Schudson, 2002: 255). As Schudson (2000: 184) puts it, "The bureaucrat provides a reliable and steady supply of raw material for news production". The so-called 'news net is intended for the 'big fish' and therefore news media place reporters at legitimated institutions where stories can be expected to be found (Tuchman, 1995: 294). Hence, there is a bias towards official sources in journalism (Lynch, 2008: 63).

Regarding journalists' relationship to their sources, a common criticism is that not all sources are equal. The news media are widely considered to serve as ideological tools serving the interests of powerful elites and their vested interests. Journalistic products are not 'neutral' in the sense that they are devoid of meaning. Human communication and language are always situated within an historical, political, economic and social context. McNair (1998: 5-7) argues that no journalistic text is free from value statements of one kind or another in the form of the assumptions, beliefs and attitudes of the author, which often become clear in the selection of new stories, what is considered newsworthy, and in the sources used for particular news stories.

Journalists are often criticised for relying too heavily on official sources, and researchers view the choice of sources in the production process in terms of who gets to be quoted and who not as an exercise of power (Harrison, 2006: 141). This could give some sources, adept at gaining access to the media, the power to set the news agenda and could lead to some sources being labelled

as either 'insiders' or 'outsiders' (Ibid: 142). According to Schudson (2002: 251), newsgathering is generally an inter-institutional collaboration between political reporters and the public figures they cover, mostly in respect of government. However, other scholars query this power and ask who actually holds the power in the relationship between journalists and their sources (see Harrison, 2006: 33, 143, Schudson, 2003: 150, 2000: 184). There seems to be an agreement among scholars, however, that official sources often have the upper hand not only in respect of non-official sources, but also in the relationship between journalists themselves and their sources (Schudson, 2003: 150). Herman and Chomsky (1988) consider official sources one of the 'filters' in their propaganda model to be a structural constraint. This was further confirmed by Galtung and Ruge (1965) in their widely quoted study *The structure of foreign news*.

Ordinary people are often neglected as sources in journalistic texts (Lederach, 1997: 94 quoted in Lynch, 2008: 21). Often they do not represent official power, whether on the side of an official government or as part of a militia (in a conflict zone), or because they are perceived as being too biased or too personally affected to be neutral. It is also more difficult to verify the authenticity of ordinary, non-official sources (Lynch, 2008: 98). Official sources also typically favour journalists from leading news outlets over journalists from smaller and maybe less prestigious media (Schudson, 2003: 138).

There also seems to be an operational bias in journalism that make journalists choose sources who personally know the key players involved in the issues covered, sources with strong views on a limited range of policy alternatives and who are adept at making short-term predictions on an issue or event (Steel, 1995). Studies have shown that particularly in foreign coverage journalists rather prefer to use government officials as sources to other kinds of experts (cf. Schudson, 2002: 260). These biases become particularly acute when journalists are operating in the field or reporting on a conflict situation.

2.   SOURCES IN PEACE JOURNALISM

Peace journalism is a form of journalism that frames stories in a way that encourages conflict analysis and a non-violent response during periods of conflict or war and also during periods of peace and absence of open conflict (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005: 5). As previously stated, on a practical level peace journalism is when journalists select what stories to report and how to report them in ways that "create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict" (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005: 5). Thus, peace journalism addresses issues around journalistic practices in relation to story selection, presentation and sources with the aim of facilitating non-violent responses to conflict. Peace journalism aims to ventilate peace initiatives from whatever quarter and to explain the underlying causes of conflict and avoid polarisation of the parties involved. It tries to transcend reified practices in order to alter journalistic practices and the subsequently mediated public discourse to a more inclusive range of people, ideas and visions (Dente Ross, 2007: 80). In this way, peace journalism works against existing journalistic practices of relying exclusively on official sources, and instead offers a way for journalism to provide a more nuanced style of reporting.

Lynch and Galtung (2010: 13) outline the ways in which peace journalism differs from war journalism. They argue that war journalism puts the focus on the visible effects of violence, embraces an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, is reactive and makes conflict and war opaque and secret (Ibid). Peace journalism, on the other hand, focuses on the invisible effects of war and violence, it makes conflict transparent, it is proactive and truth oriented rather than propaganda oriented (Ibid). Lynch and Galtung (2010: 52) also argue that war journalism and peace journalism are two different ways of reporting the same events. They are both descriptive of reality, the difference being that peace journalism tries to take in more reality (Ibid). Peace journalism gives a voice to all parties and a voice to the voiceless, and as such is people oriented rather than elite oriented (Ibid).

Peace journalism in this sense becomes a call for going beyond solely relying on official sources and urges journalists rather to be looking at alternative sources. Lynch (2008: 39) argues that journalists need to go beyond official sources in their coverage and seek out alternative, less-quoted sources. If this is the case, peace journalism should use the 'the voiceless' as sources. Lynch (2008: 21-22) states that the fact that non-official sources are being overlooked creates a false impression that the conflict is not contested from within the communities of the warring factions. This while contestation always exists and might even constitute the first "stirrings of change" (Ibid: 21). Lynch (2008: 24) gives the example of the role of the media in the Israeli–Palestinian peace talks during the years of the so-called Oslo process (1993-2000) where the Israeli media created what he calls a false sense that peace was around the corner by not interviewing ordinary and mostly poor Palestinians who continued to live under Israeli occupation. During this time, illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories doubled, and the Mitchell Commission later appointed to investigate what had gone wrong, quoted this fact as the main contributory factor to the subsequent Intifada (Ibid). Lynch (Ibid) wants to know why, if this was the case, the Israeli journalists did not include more Palestinian sources in their coverage.

In response, Lynch (2008: 25) quotes Wolsfeld (1997: 110-111) who argues that it boils down to access to sources on the other side of the conflict. Israeli journalists would have had easier access to official Israeli sources than to Palestinian sources. Access to sources, particularly in a conflict zone is of course one of the major obstacles to going beyond official sources. Once again, official sources won out over ordinary people who could talk of lived experiences and give a different perspective on the situation. One problem in this regard is that government officials and their spokespeople and advisors are themselves parajournalists, seeking to gain favourable coverage from the news media (Schudson, 2002: 251).

Lederach (1997: 94, quoted in Lynch, 2008: 21) states that there is no conflict where there have not been people who have had visions of peace, those often emanating from their own experiences of pain. The problem however is, as Lederach (Ibid) states, that these people are often neglected as sources in journalistic contexts. We once again have the same problem: they do not represent official power, whether on the side of an official government or as part of a militia, or because they are perceived as being too biased or too personally affected to be neutral.

Good practice of course requires that journalists verify their sources and the information they provide by seeking out counterarguments. If these counterarguments cannot be found from more traditional sources then journalists need to seek out alternative sources (Lynch, 2008: 205-206). Not to be hostage to just one source, particularly those of governments that control sources of information, is listed as one of the ten commandments of peace journalism by Tehranian (2004: 241). Tehranian also lists, as another commandment, the importance of giving a voice to the oppressed and to the peacemakers in order to represent and empower them (Ibid: 242). In this regard, the alternative media, grass-roots media and community media could play a crucial role (Keeble, 2010: 55). Social media platforms and online sources could also be the answer to this as the usage and reliance on Internet or other electronic sources, unless part of an official arrangement, could constitute a departure from the paradigm of sole reliance on more traditional and official sources.

3. ONLINE SOURCES AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO OFFICIAL SOURCES

A consistent criticism of the news media is that if they are to fulfil their democratic role they should draw upon a wider variety of news sources (Schudson, 2003: 152). The social and democratic functions of journalism resonates with the idea that journalism should use 'the voiceless' as sources, becoming a call for going beyond solely official sources and rather looking at alternative sources. The finding that journalism draws too heavily on official sources is often a major criticism levelled at the news media (Ibid, 2002: 258), particularly by advocates for peace journalism (cf. Lynch, 2008; Lynch & Galtung, 2010; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). New media platforms and the proliferation of social media networks have certainly impacted on traditional news routines and practices, and also journalism as a whole. The Internet contains a wealth of information that helps journalists identify stories and sources, and the sheer accessibility of public information provides news organisations and individual journalists with very cheap and quick access to information.

There are however problems in using alternative sources, and particularly when it comes to online sources. The multitude of information available through the Internet and many other new media platforms is unrivalled. However, this does not necessarily guarantee quality. The Internet and the plethora of social network sites, blogs and Twitter feeds that exist today have opened up the possibility for content to be published without any editorial control. Citron and Norton (2011) and Banks (2010) indicate that rumours, slander and even hate speech abound on the Internet and other new media platforms.

The traditional value of verifying authenticity of information through multiple sources is more important than ever. The greatest challenge that journalists face in this Information Age is not necessarily the need to negotiate and navigate the thousands of sites and comments posted, but rather the need to distinguish between a legitimate piece of information and those that are less valid. Huckerby (2005: 56) considers the web to be more like "a garbage heap than a library", and thus journalists need to become experts at sifting through rubbish and at detecting dubious and biased information. Even though there are sites featuring debates about world issues and political arguments, more emphasis seems overall to be placed on the social aspect (Hyde-Clarke

& Van Tonder, 2011). As *The Washington Post's* senior editor, Milton Coleman, noted: "Social networks … can be valuable tools in gathering and disseminating news and information. They also create some potential hazards we need to recognise" (as quoted in Grensing-Pophal, 2010). In South Africa, we have seen the case of false Twitter accounts created in the name of ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema, Twitter feeds that, unfortunately, were taken at face value by some journalists (SAPA, 2010). With regard to social media and Twitter in particular, Matheson and Allan (2010: 175-176) highlight the speed with which messages can spread via social media and the dangers of this if messages re-tweeted or otherwise turn out to be false.

What happens online is often that boundaries between reporting and advocacy and/or political action are blurred (Matheson & Allan, 2010: 183). During the attack on Gaza, both global peace movements and official Israeli sources were active online to a greater extent than were both the civilian and the official Palestinian news sources. The tone online was often more ideological than reportorial (Abbey, 2008 quoted in Matheson & Allan, 2010: 182), while new media platforms and the blogosphere became another war zone (Ibid: 183). The blogosphere became a propaganda platform and the Israeli ambassador to the US even held a press conference on Twitter for non-journalists (Ibid: 183).

However, social media can also fill the silences created by government censorship and suppression of the news media (Matheson & Allan, 2010: 187). Matheson and Allan (2010: 181) argue that in a war zone, where the media with a few exceptions might be kept out, as was the case with many of the mainstream media organisations during the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2008, social media platforms provide powerful alternative news channels for both the public and the news media itself. Even those news teams with access to the besieged Gaza city relied on blogs and Twitter feeds. Thus Al Jazeera who already had six staff members in Gaza, still republished blog entries from organisations such as Oxfam (Ibid).

Matheson and Allan (2010: 184-185) also cite the example of the Sri Lankan government's 2008 push to flush out the Tamil Tigers as another example of a government-controlled effort to limit access to the mainstream media, one that rather triggered a propaganda war on the Internet in which it became difficult to separate partisan arguments from attempts at reporting and bearing witness. The news-reporting vacuum triggered the role of the Internet (Ibid). In many instances, the Tamil diaspora established news outlets on television and through websites, some of which were closed down by European governments under anti-terrorism laws (Ibid: 185).

The argument is that journalism cannot afford to ignore the fact that new media platforms have created global public spaces beyond those of the more established news organisations and other government and official organs (Matheson & Allan, 2010: 187). Social media are rewriting the protocols of war and conflict reporting (Ibid). If this is indeed the case, one could surely argue that the social media are also rewriting the protocols for peace journalism, and that social media can assist not only the media in finding alternative voices and a plurality of voices but also countries and governments in approaching information and policy options in new ways.

However, relying on non-official and non-traditional sources would mean a radical departure from the conventional idea that the use of official sources is a cornerstone of objective reporting (Lynch, 2008: 63, 135). How journalists use their sources is closely related to concepts of objectivity. Objectivity is seen as a professional ideology of journalism (Tuchman, 1978). It is by invoking objectivity that journalism can claim to be truthful and accurate (McNair, 1998: 65). While scholars have often maintained that objectivity in journalism is unattainable (cf. Calcutt & Hammond, 2011: 97-117), routines of journalism such as fact-checking or relying on more than one source have developed as ways for journalists to obtain some sort of objectivity in their reporting, "as ways to help the reporter rise above his or her individual dispositions or biases" (Calcutt & Hammond, 2011: 99).

Critics argue that objectivity in journalism is unattainable for reasons of human fallibility, that is, as humans we are biased by our backgrounds and interests and thus cannot be objective. Also, the selection process within journalism further distorts ideals of objectivity (Calcutt & Hammond, 2011: 100-101). Calcutt and Hammond (2011: 100) also argue that there is a further objection to the realisation of objectivity in journalism that springs from the idea that objectivity is achieved solely by relying on official sources, an idea that they argue undermines journalism's democratic role.

However, Lynch and Galtung (2010: xii) draw attention to *The Structure of Foreign News* by Galtung and Ruge (1965), a study that showed news coverage to be highly conventional and structured. Lynch and Galtung (2010: xii) argue that in terms of peace journalism it is not only human fallibility that militates against objectivity but the tacit operation of a set of journalistic conventions that arose out of the economic and political interests of the news media industry itself at particular times and places.

There is thus a documented bias towards official sources. Lynch (2008: 63) argues that this springs from the idea that official sources seemingly come with a guarantee of already having been verified and of being trustworthy by virtue of their official status/offices (Ibid). Journalism is also subject to the normative expectations of its audience. Reese (2001: 175) argues that the audience thinks it benefits society, that journalists adhere to certain roles and ethical conduct and that journalists observe certain standards that do not violate expectations of social order. Thus, it is conceivable that the audience also thinks that the media should only use the most reliable, objective and truthful sources. Once again, this reflects a bias towards official sources, not only from journalists, but also from the audience, this because such sources are perceived to be more legitimate and credible (Lynch, 2008: 63).

4. DATA FINDINGS: SOURCING PRACTICES AND PEACE JOURNALISM

The responses indicate that South African journalists do indeed use both official and social media online sources. The question is whether or not online sources are reliable, and whether journalists are supposed to rely on online sources in their reporting – whether these be official government sites, news agency sites, research institute sites or non-official social network sites and blogs. There is also the question, especially in respect of conflict, as to whether online sources tend to

be more biased or whether people feel more at ease expressing their political beliefs online, even if these beliefs could be seen as more partisan and/or even amount to hate speech, particularly in the case of social network sites such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs. If this is indeed the case, what then are the implications for peace journalism and peace discourse in the news media? The following is an outline of the interviewees' responses to these questions.

4.1 Journalists' usage and reliance on online sources

When asked whether or not they considered using online sources, be they official or not, when researching a story and whether they found that they were increasingly relying on online sources, almost all of the participating journalists stated that indeed they did. Online sources were used for verifying breaking stories and follow-up stories, for background research and for gauging public opinion. The responses varied. The very positive journalists emphasised the benefits of using online sources, as is exemplified by the following responses:

> Yes, because some of the tip-offs from our sources come from social networks. I have blogs where I monitor every action/stories from political parties and politicians. It helps me to stay informed (SABC respondent 2).

> I find Twitter really useful and look at my tweeter account at least twice a day. I look at whatever updates there are (*Star* respondent 1).

> I follow hundreds of blogs and tweets and also blog and tweet myself. I find that this gives me story ideas as well as background information on stories (e-tv respondent).

Then there are the more sceptical journalists who, like this respondent, use only official sources online:

> I use official accounts, but I don't rely on hearsay. I rely on reputable people and organizations. I use government website and research organizations including NGO websites (*City Press* respondent 1).

The journalists surveyed made it clear that they relied on a variety of online sources, everything from official government sources to social media sites, personal blogs and tweets. Online sources were also used differently during different periods. Major events such as elections or other important political events seem to have triggered much activity online with a clearer presence of political parties, public officials and the public and civil society at large by means of social network sites and blogs. As a respondent said:

> There was a period during the National Election campaigns for 2009 when political parties modernised their campaign methods and Cope and the DA in particular were very active on Facebook. That's the time that I used online sources a lot (*Mail & Guardian* respondent 1).

This was further confirmed by other journalists:

> We learned of the death of Professor Kader Asmal[3] via a tweet from a family member. We did not rely solely on this source but were able to verify the information pretty easily. Online sources provide the tip-off for a story more than it does the entire story (e-tv respondent).

There seems to be a general sense of relying mostly on official sources even though social network sites and blogs are also used. Why then do journalists use online sources? Most journalists cite ease of access and the fact that online sources provide additional information on stories currently in the media as the reason for using online sources. Online sources are also used for research and for accessing archive material and news clippings:

> Sometimes it's because I saw a discussion about the story I'm working on. Once in a while I've created a story idea out of what someone said on Facebook and on several occasions, a Facebook friend referred me to the wall of their friend to look at what they are saying and it's been helpful on many occasions, even if it's just to give me a lead about the story I'm working on (*Mail & Guardian* respondent 1).

There seems to be a clear feeling that online sources provide a dimension that more traditional sources do not provide in terms of gauging public opinion and staying abreast of what ordinary people are thinking. Respondents said that they used Facebook, for example, to gauge people's reactions to a story, as exemplified by the following response:

> Social media tends to be good for gauging public opinion and what people's reactions are to a particular story, whether they are commenting on it or not, etc. (*Star* respondent 2).

Other journalists stated that online sources tended to be more up to date than were printed sources and that social media reflected public opinion in a way that more traditional media failed to do. *City Press* Respondent 1 stated:

> Social media is where people interact. So I use it to check what people are saying. I myself do tweet. (*City Press* respondent 1)

This resonates with the idea of online sources providing an alternative to more traditional official sources. However, some respondents cautioned against thinking that what was published online necessarily represented public opinion. The following respondent spoke about research conducted to determine who the people were who actually got to comment in the news media in general:

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[3] Professor Kader Asmal was a South African politician who held several portfolios including that of Minister of Water Affairs and Minister of Education. Asmal passed away in 2011.

> It is a very small, very opinionated group of people, who speak to other, very opinionated people. Those who are expressing an opinion do NOT represent a wider population or even represent a group of people. What happens very often is that journalists (traditional that is) use these sources to spice up their articles, and it gives the impression that a group of people, perhaps even influential, has a specific opinion. That is not the case. Also, social/internet media – due to their immediacy, have even less ways to check facts. Journalists often think that quoting Twitter for instance, (when reporting from Libya, etc.) gives them 'sources on the ground'. There are documented cases of people who claimed to be oppressed lesbian Arab women and turned out to be American men. Internet sources are difficult to check, their information is THEIR view, which is not representative and not verifiable. As such, journalists should use these sources in the same way they are using others: if they trust them, if they can verify the information with others and if they are prepared to name them (Media monitor 1).

The above responses serve to demonstrate that journalists increasingly rely on online sources, particularly around major political events and breaking stories when speed and ease of access are paramount. There are many questions, however, with regard to how credible online sources are, how objective they are, what happens to source verification when deadlines loom and time is of the essence, and how different sources online are perceived in terms of credibility. If peace journalism is to be realised through the use of alternative sources, such sources need to be verified sources and be seen to be credible so as not to add to polarisation of viewpoints.

4.2 The legitimacy and credibility of online sources

When asked about the legitimacy and credibility of online sources, all respondents agreed that all sources, whether traditional or online, need to be verified, and that traditional conventions in journalism of verifying and cross-checking sources still applied for information accessed through the Internet and other social media platforms. However, many journalists and also academic respondents expressed real scepticism and caution regarding the credibility of online sources:

> Every [piece of] information needs to be verified with the people mentioned in that matter and more people who are close to the action. Relying on online information only is dangerous because rumours are spread every minute and many of them remain rumours (*Mail & Guardian* respondent).

Another respondent added to this:

> I am very cautious of online sources. If I am to quote from an online, I make sure that the website is a legitimate website of that source, e.g. I will never use Financial Times article unless it is [on the] FT website. I am also cautious of relying on Twitter and Facebook as sources or basis of my story because most of the time the news is

> churned out by ordinary people without journalistic training, or [I will] test to verify the truth, meaning is rumour. I only rely on Twitter for breaking news if the news originate[s] from credible and known news agencies and outlets. The same applies for Facebook. (*City Press* respondent 2).

It is important to note that there is a difference in terms of how online sources are perceived. Government sites, research institutes and other news organisations, for example, are perceived as being reliable and credible, while tweets, blogs and other social media sites are deemed less credible.

> You need to understand that all information MUST be verified and confirmed. Most of the news tip-offs we receive come from direct phone calls, faxes, emails, SMS or via Facebook/Twitter and other social networks. Regardless of the way the information reaches us, it still has to be subjected to a rigorous process of verification and confirmation – and that would be to interview the source of the information personally. Ideally, we try to get three independent sources for each story. However, there are exceptions: such as wikileaks, which is generally regarded as a source. The information on wikileaks cannot generally be confirmed, and so it comes with an automatic disclaimer (SABC respondent 4).

Many journalists stated that they only used websites and the archives of research institutes, universities and government websites. Others stated that they also used major news sites, such as Al Jazeera, BBC, AP, the UK *Guardian*, News24, Dailymaverick, *City Press* and *Mail & Guardian* - all official sources, deemed to be credible.

Many respondents however were cautious with regard to the difficulties encountered in an online environment in terms of how to verify sources of information in general. Many also highlighted the fact that online sources needed to be contextualised and presented as actually being online sources when introduced in a text. One respondent stated:

> As with all sources, Internet sources should be verified and not taken only on face value. Internet sources should also be contextualised, i.e. when online sources are used, journalists should explain who produced these sources, where they were found, whether they should be considered as authoritative, factual information or as opinion and debate (Academic respondent 1).

There was also a sense that there was still a bias towards official online sources and other news media rather than the alternative voices being used by journalists as exemplified by the following response:

> A typical example is the way most African media have covered the Libyan 'uprising' – heavily depending on Internet sources (read Western media) ... In the end we have a uniform/standardised narrative of what's going on there when in fact this is

a multifaceted crisis which necessitated reporting from various angles (Academic respondent 2).

There was also caution against relying too heavily on online sources, as this respondent argued:

Journalists have to tap every source they can on a story, and the Internet is a rich resource if used properly. Whether it is a problem to rely too much on online sources really depends a great deal on the story. In general, it would be inadequate to rely solely on online material, as this precludes first-hand reportage and one very real criticism of current trends in journalism is the decline in first-hand observational reporting. So one would strongly advise against exclusive reliance on online sources - but it does also depend on what story one is doing (Academic respondent 3).

When quoting sources, respondents pointed out that it was important to identify whether sources were saying things in their own capacity vis-à-vis what they had paraphrased or copied from other sources:

Again, credibility of source is paramount, and differentiating between what they are saying and what they are merely repeating/retweeting (*Business Day* respondent).

In essence, all respondents agreed that online sources could and should be used, within limits, and always provided they could be verified. One respondent set out the ideal scenario:

Ideally, online sources should be used as supplementary information to what has been originally uncovered. Internet sources should help provide background information to the story and providing more nuances in cases where the story involves something novel (e.g. the tsunami). In other words, journalists should not use Internet sources as primary sources. They could also use online sources to tip them on stories – for example, most media now get their tips from Twitter (Media monitor 2).

Hence, it is clear that most journalists, within limits, consider online sources provided they have been verified in accordance with journalistic practice. If a more measured style of reporting is to be achieved and if peace journalism is to be realised through the usage of alternative sources online, journalists will have to learn to verify non-official sources, in that it is claimed that online sources tend to be more biased and that rumours, slander and even hate speech abound on the Internet and other new media platforms (Banks 2010; Citron & Norton, 2011).

4.3 Online sources, political bias and hate speech

When asked whether they felt that online sources were more biased than traditional sources and whether they thought that people felt more at ease expressing their political beliefs

online, even if these beliefs could be seen as more partisan and/or even amounted to hate speech, the responses were slightly more divided.

> Possibly. There's still a feeling of informality about online media that may put some people more at ease than if they thought their words were going into a newspaper or out on air. South Africans are getting more online savvy quite quickly though (*Business Day* respondent).

Another respondent argued that it did not really matter whether online sources tended to be more biased or not since they had to be verified anyway and could only be quoted in their own capacity: "[All] sources, whether electronic or not, need to be verified and need to be quoted in name" (e-tv respondent). The general consensus though is that journalists need to differ between what online source they are talking about, once again there is a difference between official website and non-official social network sites for example. The majority of the sample of media monitors and academic researchers were more stringent in their responses, believing that political bias was more apparent when considering online sources, here referring specifically to social network media:

Yes – Internet sources are less bound by the conventional professional ideologies of journalism, and therefore would be less likely to comply with notions of 'objectivity', 'balance', 'neutrality', etc. (Academic respondent 1).

Another respondent further stated:

> Our research shows that amongst social media opinionistas, opinions are far more extreme (to the positive or negative) and less neutral. The Internet as a platform is for those who have an opinion expressing it to those who want one, while the traditional media is (more) for the dissemination of news and information (hence neutral). Internet is more emotional, traditional media more rational. Logically, Internet sources hence are more biased, politically and otherwise (biased to be seen rather as a polarisation) (Media monitor 1).

There was also the idea that journalists went online to actually seek out different opinions in that people seemed more at ease expressing their views online, particularly through social network sites and blogs. One respondent stated:

> Respondents, interviewees, spokespeople believe and experience the Internet to provide a platform for outspokenness, to express their opinions in frank and straightforward ways, to have more authority and validity, and also, if need be, to have more indemnity from direct and immediate verification. Being frank is often also seen by others as being biased (Academic respondent 2).

There were however media monitors and scholars who were sceptical of the idea that online sources were more biased or opinionated:

> I cannot say for certain that the political bias in Internet sources would be more/worse than what one would find in traditional sources, but the fact that information on the Internet is pre-packaged (mostly by established and often 'positioned' institutional sources) means that there is greater chance for such information to carry the preferred views of its sponsors. The danger in this era of lazy, copy-and-paste journalism is that not many journalists would seek to interrogate this information and to eliminate the biases that it is likely to carry (Media monitor 2).

This scepticism was echoed by another respondent:

> I would need to understand why people suggest Internet sources are more biased. Subject to other insights, I would not immediately say there is anything about the Internet as such, which breeds greater bias. After all, practically everybody is there: from World Bank to anarchists, from Helen Zille to my 15-year-old son. And it would include blogs, mainstream news sites, Twitter, organisational sites and much else. I think one has to unpack what kinds of sources one means: certainly, journalists make a mistake if they see the Internet as a single, undifferentiated thing. Each site or blog needs separate consideration to check for bias (Academic respondent 4).

From the responses it would seem that on the one hand there is a sense that all sources are or can be biased and that agendas need to be clarified. On the other hand, there is also a sense that not all sources are the same. Official sources are often distinguished from newer social media platforms, which tend to be considered more biased or polarised in terms of their views. The question then becomes whether or not journalists should rely on social network media if these can be said to be more biased and more difficult to verify, particularly when it comes to covering sensitive political issues or situations, more so during a conflict or war situation. Can they be used as primary sources, only for context or as illustrations in order to provide alternative voices in the news coverage? What are the potential benefits for journalism of moving away from relying solely on official sources, online or not, and rather to access a wider variety of alternative sources through social media platforms, blogs and Twitter feeds? Are there aspects of peace journalism practices with regard to sources that could enrich mainstream news coverage even in a non-conflict situation and in times of absence of open conflict or war? In terms of South Africa, could peace journalism have a role to fulfil in ameliorating potentially polarising and explosive discourses in the South African news media and as such preventing potential conflict? South Africa is a country mostly without any open conflict. However, as Hyde-Clarke (2011) indicates, there are definitely tensions and inflammatory statements circulating in the media and a strong focus on polarisation of political agendas playing themselves out in the South African news media.

5. *CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE REALISATION OF PEACE JOURNALISM THROUGH ALTERNATIVE ONLINE SOURCES*

If, through peace journalism we hope to realise a journalism that encourages conflict analysis and non-violent responses both during periods of conflict or war and during periods of peace

and absence of open conflict as set out by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005: 5), a form of journalism that takes in more reality (Lynch & Galtung, 2010: 52), one which takes account of a multitude of sources and avoids polarisation (Dente Ross, 2007: 80; Tehranian 2004: 241), a journalism that goes beyond solely relying on official sources (Lynch, 2008: 39), then the use of new media platforms and social media outlets could help facilitate a different approach to journalism, and the opening up of journalism for 'taking in more reality' and, giving a voice to ordinary people and to the voiceless. All of this provided that journalists are equipped with practical tools for verifying the credibility of sources, particularly those accessed through social media platforms.

The South African data reveal that journalists do indeed rely on, and use, online sources, official and non-official. All use it, even though some respondents are sceptical towards the usage of sources such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs. What prompts journalists to use online media seems to be mainly the ease and speed at which sources can be accessed. Journalists state that they use online sources for background research, for breaking stories and for following up on major stories already in the media. Online media are also used for gauging public opinion and in this sense it could be a tool for connecting with ordinary people and providing a voice for the voiceless. Respondents however caution against thinking that what is published online necessarily represents public opinion. This is however not necessarily a core objective for realising more conflict-sensitive reporting; there is value in itself for peace journalism to hear the voices that fall beyond the mainstream and which do not necessarily represent general public opinion so as to provide a plurality of voices in the news media.

Even though there was some disagreement about the extent to which online sources could be considered to be more biased than the more traditional news sources, almost all of the respondents indicated that Internet sources did indeed have tendencies towards being more politically biased than traditional sources. It is important to specify the types of Internet sources that are biased. On this point the respondents differed, with some naming the usage of the more official websites that were considered to be legitimate, such as government websites, research institutes, and other news-media sites on the one hand and social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter on the other hand. It was furthermore declared to be very important that journalists and all media practitioners treat every source with caution and scepticism. It was moreover argued that all sources have an agenda and that journalists should therefore not use sources without questioning their credibility. Also, too much reliance on online sources by journalists was said to be causing a decline in observational reporting. If this was the case it could have implications for the realisation of the ideal of peace journalism to provide a more balanced and informed view of a conflict situation.

As Lynch and McGoldrick (2010: 92) argue, if all sources are partial, peace journalism can be said to be a means of supplying cues and clues to prompt and enable readers and audiences to negotiate their own readings in response to iterations of meaning. This, so as to bring all sources to the same 'starting gate' and in the same position (Ibid). In the case of the Sri Lankan government's control of sources in the 2009 insurgence in which international professional journalists were kept out of the war zone, Tamil sources did provide some witness statements to

the outside world. However, these were considered biased and as such little used even though they might have warranted more attention. This confirms Lederach's idea (1997: 94 quoted in Lynch, 2008: 21) that ordinary people are often neglected as sources in journalistic texts as they do not represent official power or simply because they are perceived as being too biased or too personally affected to be neutral (Ibid).

Overall, it would seem that the fact that journalists do indeed use online sources and increasingly rely on such sources resonates with the idea that the power balance has shifted from more traditional sources to online sources. Even though there still is some bias towards official sources, even in the online environment, many journalists testify to also using non-official sources such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs, provided their legitimacy can be verified. In the coverage of war and conflict, even if the conflict is latent, this practice will open up access to new news sources for journalists even in extreme cases where governments have cut off access to the mainstream media and government officials. Journalism cannot afford to ignore the ways in which social media can assist the news media in finding alternative voices and a plurality of voices (Matheson & Allan, 2010: 187). As such, the usage of alternative sources online can take journalists one step further to realising the ideals of peace journalism in South Africa.

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