

Twelve Ways the Media Misrepresent Violence

Norwegian peace studies professor Johann Galtung has laid out 12 points of concern where journalism often goes wrong when dealing with violence. Each implicitly suggests more explicit remedies.

1. Decontextualizing violence: focusing on the irrational without looking at the reasons for unresolved conflicts and polarization.
2. Dualism: reducing the number of parties in a conflict to two, when often more are involved. Stories that just focus on internal developments often ignore such outside or ?external? forces as foreign governments and transnational companies.
3. Manicheanism: portraying one side as good and demonizing the other as ?evil.?
4. Armageddon: presenting violence as inevitable, omitting alternatives.
5. Focusing on individual acts of violence while avoiding structural causes, like poverty, government neglect, and military or police repression.
6. Confusion: focusing only on the conflict arena (i.e., the battlefield or location of violent incidents) but not on the forces and factors that influence the violence.
7. Excluding and omitting the bereaved, thus never explaining why there are acts of revenge and spirals of violence.
8. Failure to explore the causes of escalation and the impact of media coverage itself.
9. Failure to explore the goals of outside interventionists, especially big powers.
10. Failure to explore peace proposals and offer images of peaceful outcomes.
11. Confusing cease-fires and negotiations with actual peace.
12. Omitting reconciliation: conflicts tend to reemerge if attention is not paid to efforts to heal fractured societies. When news about attempts to resolve conflicts are absent, fatalism is reinforced. That can help engender even more violence, when people have no images or information about possible peaceful outcomes and the promise of healing.

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Peace reporting

Can the New York Times Count? or Quote? Peace Activists?

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, the New York Times has downplayed and distorted peace rallies and demonstrations against a military response.

After thousands of anti-war activists gathered in Washington, D.C. on September 29, the Times responded with a 10-sentence story, under the headline ?Protesters in Washington Urge Peace with Terrorists.? Given that a call for bringing terrorists to justice through non-military means was central to the rallies, the headline is a gross mischaracterization of the protesters? message.

The Times also misreported other basic facts, like the size of the crowd in Washington. The

Times estimated that a ?few hundred protesters? were on hand, while the official police estimate was 7,000 (Washington Post, 9/30/01). One only had to watch the live coverage on C-SPAN to know the Times was way off.

On September 21, the paper reported on the protests that were held on about 150 campuses across the country. But the perspectives of the thousands of students who participated in the day of action were almost entirely absent.

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