

## The Peace Counts project: A promoter of real change or mere idealism?

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The German Peace Counts<sup>1</sup> project aims to discover role models for peacemaking around the world and to give them a high level of exposure by producing features and photographic essays. The project is interdisciplinary, combining the scientific know-how of conflict researchers with the media skills of experienced journalists. Its premise is “peace is possible!” (Gleich in Gerster 2005: 197–225).

Contrary to the mainstream public opinion and the mainstream media landscape – both of which are overshadowed by the paradigm of war – Peace Counts maintains that “peace pays!” (ibid: 227–44) and that peace is imperative. The project adopts the “best practice” concept and aims to show the close relationship between stability and sustainable economic development. The project exploits multimedia to reach a large audience with content distributed through magazines, radio, television, books, and school curricular materials. Financial backing is provided by the Federal Foreign office in Berlin, by the foundation “Sonnenwiese” (Vaduz) and the “zivik programme”, which is based in Berlin and forms part of the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (IFA).<sup>2</sup>

The project promotes the professionalisation of journalists as advocates for peace and not as impartial, neutral observers. To what extent does this project help find ways of overcoming the old paradigms of war reporting? Does it constitute an important critique of traditional definitions of professionalisation? Or is it nothing more than idealism?

These questions can be answered using material from conversations with journalists who have played a leading role in this project including Michael Gleich, Uli Reinhardt and Tilman Woertz. They were asked to what extent peace

education, peace research and communication sciences provide them with sources and points of reference. Their answers were then set against the core positions of these research areas. Three aspects of the Peace Counts project are explored: To what extent does the aim of the project go against human nature? Does it fit into the existing categories of journalistic concepts? Does it put the findings from conflict research into practice? The answers to these questions will make it possible to assess how idealistic the concept is, and where it might be improved.

### The project<sup>3</sup>

Peace Counts is basically a network of journalists operating worldwide to find and document examples and people who show that peace can work. The idea comes from Michael Gleich, a German journalist who has been to many war zones and who on many occasions felt it highly unacceptable that only failures and deaths of the combatants were reported. In 2002, he founded the Peace Counts project and shortly afterwards, as the head of the project, founded the non-profit Culture Counts Foundation which made it possible to apply for public funds – for example, from the Foreign Office or the Society for Technical Cooperation. He discovered a kindred spirit in photojournalist Uli Reinhardt. After decades working in war zones and disaster areas, Reinhardt founded a journalists' agency in the south of Germany called *Zeitenspiegel*<sup>4</sup> where he gathered together 40 photographers and reporters.

A second key partner was the Tuebingen Institute for Peace Education (Institut für Friedenspaedagogik, Tuebingen e.V.<sup>5</sup>). The educationalists got on board straight away as Peace Counts offered new stories, while much of their own material had become dated – stories about people like Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Teresa had little appeal, above all for the younger generation. The institute used the reports by Peace Counts journalists to produce brochures and multi-media CD-ROMs for schools and is working to show young people as early as possible how obstacles can be overcome.<sup>6</sup>

Peace Counts reporters and photographers do not focus on high-level politics: their approach is not “top-down” but “bottom-up”. For this reason they show what peacebuilders achieve in their own – limited – area and who they are (Gerster op cit). They have introduced us to the Irish ex-terrorists Joe Doherty and Peter McGuire who offer young people ideas for their free time to keep them away from paramilitary groups. We hear from Victoria Maloka from South Africa who visits violent criminals in prison to encourage them to think about how to solve problems without breaking someone's neck. The project spotlights people with clear ideas on

how to suppress violence in their specific environment and bring about harmonious co-existence, despite all the differences and conflicts of interest. Nobody has a fail-safe recipe for a rapid solution but everyone can contribute their experience to show how success can be achieved, even in long-drawn-out processes and seemingly dead end situations. Peace Counts reports and documents this work and passes on the impetus, showing how similar results could be achieved elsewhere.

Since the organisation was founded teams of Peace Counts reporters (generally teams of two: a writer and a photographer) have carried out research in more than 30 post-conflict regions including Afghanistan, the Balkans, Israel, Palestine, Rwanda, India and Brazil. The project uses examples of conflict to generate inductive findings on causes and escalation, and ways of transforming conflicts through human co-operation. Peace Counts is a multi-media project. It includes print publications in quality media<sup>7</sup>, features on public television, a richly-illustrated book (Gerster op cit), forums where a broad audience can get to know, live in Germany, the peacebuilders shown in the reports from Sri Lanka or Colombia live in Germany, a homepage and the special sub-projects – the Peace Counts School and Peace Counts on Tour.

Peace educationalists from Tuebingen play a leading role in the Peace Counts School<sup>8</sup>. Their aim is to teach children and young people in Germany that peace is possible and demonstrate this with examples. To do this they prepare their reports to make it clear to children and young people which pattern of behaviour is required.

Peace Counts on Tour<sup>9</sup> works in conflict and crisis regions to sensitise people to the reasons for escalations in violent confrontations, using peace education resources and drawing on examples from journalism that focus on reconciliation. “Vivid examples of peacebuilders” aims to open people’s eyes to possible paths to a solution. The tour converges on the multi-media exhibition, Peacebuilders around the World, and the accompanying programme with learning circles, workshops and lectures. The Institute for Peace Education has prepared examples of best practice and developed support material, and it organises workshops for teachers, teacher trainers, and members of security forces and NGOs in the area where the exhibition is taking place. The project achieves a high level of local media coverage.

In addition to the first two stages: bringing stories about peacebuilders around the world to Germany and bringing the stories behind pictures back to their countries, a third stage was introduced in 2009: working alongside journalists in these countries to write stories about peacebuilders there.

Tilman Woertz, who has worked frequently in the Ivory Coast reporting and training journalists, organised the first journalists’ workshop of this type

there together with Uli Reinhardt. The journalists who took part – five writers and five photographers – all came from the capital, Yamoussoukro, from neutral media groups, as well as others from different political positions. The workshop was financed by the Goethe Institute, the Swiss Embassy, GTZ and prize money from the Peter Becker Prize. Each participant could suggest people or initiatives that brought about solutions in the nation's trouble spots. Ten of the subjects were selected and assignments were distributed to determine who would write which report. The finished stories were discussed in detail during a second meeting.

Tilman Woertz talked of a “win-win situation”: he learned a lot from the strong oral tradition of the Ivory Coast and some of the local participants got to know their own country better for the first time because they did not stay in the office for the research but drove out to the location; for the first time they had days to dedicate to this sort of research. “This experience was clearly quite unusual, as they kept on checking that it was really possible,” explained Woertz. “In my opinion, there were no relevant cultural difficulties between us and them. Most of the differences were caused by the system.” Thus, you had to know the characteristics of the political system and the media landscape, he said. This explains a lot. “The journalists there are used to reporting only on chiefs, leaders and leading politicians,” he continued. “They are authority-oriented, wary of conflict and happy to leave out explanatory context because everyone knows how a soldier lives anyway.”

The finished reports reached the publications where the participating journalists work. Government media and rebel broadcasters reported on the project. Traditional methods help to connect with the people that the media cannot reach: a storyteller developed a programme jointly with Peace Counts and took it on tour in cities and villages with Woertz and Reinhardt. They now want to find buyers in Germany for a film and documentary about the project as well as for some of the reports. Their expectations are based on past experience: there is interest in stories about peacebuilding, but there are also some misgivings. However, there is no doubt that they will continue: the next workshops are planned for Guatemala and Sri Lanka.

## Classifying the Peace Counts project

Can the journalistic concept, on which the Peace Counts reports build, show a way forward or is it simply an expression of idealism? Three aspects must be considered:

- is Peace Counts consistent with human nature or does it go against it?
- can Peace Counts be said to be using existing journalistic concepts and criteria? Is it a new concept? Or is it not a journalistic concept at all?
- is the key role of Peace Counts to put findings from peace education, and peace and conflict research into practice?

## **Between good and evil: Is Peace Counts consistent with human nature?**

“Good news is good news” – the Peace Counts project overturns the old publicist’s adage to show that “peace is possible”, as Michael Gleich puts it. He criticises the emphasis on war and violence in journalistic reporting which mostly follows the opposite motto: “Good news, no news” or “If it bleeds, it leads.”

Dieter Senghaas (2009: 2) argues that many historians regret the “loss of peace imagery in modernity” since works such as Picasso’s Temple of Peace, installed in a chapel in Vallauris in South-East France, are the exceptions. Senghaas describes a radio broadcast in which the first movement of Gustav Holst’s the Planets Suite “Mars: The Bringer of War” was played with trumpets, trombones and percussion, and then the final movement “Venus: The Bringer of Peace” was played in a bright and epic style with horns, harps and the glockenspiel. The presenter described the music of peace as boring and said that the composer had brought his full virtuosity to bear in his portrayal of battle and conflict. Similar comments are found on the internet: “Peace is boring” claimed editors to whom they had offered their reports on peacebuilders.

The American psychologist, Leon Festinger (1957), developed his theory of cognitive dissonance half a century ago. According to this theory, information that does not fit into a person’s own basic convictions is deflected, and increasingly so, the greater the distance from the dominant reality in a society. This would imply that journalism, as produced by the Peace Counts team, would not just be idealistic, but hopeless. Michael Gleich disagrees. People and society as a whole want to know how to progress and are looking for reasons to be optimistic. In his opinion the problem lies largely with the media and most of his colleagues there: denouncing failure is easier, because it makes an impact and attracts more attention. It also sells well because it satisfies a further need to warn people about dangers, even if it is only a warning against alleged dangers.

Michael Gleich sees himself as a sort of “entrepreneur” who wants to produce peace. He believes there are always only three options for dealing with reality: love it (acceptance and surrender), leave it (leaving the place, the company and so on),

or change it (changing the conditions). In journalism a lot changes if you change your own perceptions and divert attention from failure to success.

## Is Peace Counts a new concept?

The Gulf War in 1991 and the changes in war reporting that emerged in the coverage of the conflict contributed to the adoption of the concept of peace journalism (which really came from peace research) in the discourse of the communication sciences. The critical analysis of mainstream war reporting tended to highlight the distorting effects of conventional news values (negativism, personalisation, the emphasis on elite countries and elite people: see Galtung and Vincent 1992: 7; Schicha 1999: 12; Jaeger 2002) as well as the stress on winning and losing that was reminiscent of sports journalism (Albrecht and Becker 2002; Loeffelholz 2004).

In contrast, peace journalism is a “programme of journalistic reporting which contributes to peaceful conflict resolution through publications” (Hanitzsch 2004: 172). The journalist takes on the roles of information broker and critical inspector, performing central reporting functions such as informing, criticising and exposing (Weischenberg 2005). The Norwegian peace and conflict researcher, Johan Galtung, and the communication scientist, Richard C. Vincent, designed a practical concept for peace journalism. In essence it is a ten-point list (Galtung and Vincent op cit: 126). According to Galtung (1998), who summarises it in four core requirements, peace journalism should be:

1. peace- and conflict-oriented;
2. truth-oriented;
3. people-oriented; and
4. solution-oriented.

These requirements can be applied to the Peace Counts concept. The project focuses attention on solutions but also examines the conflict to make the context clear. This fully satisfies the first of Galtung’s requirements. Requirement 2, truth-orientation, is satisfied by careful, critical research but the main concern of Peace Counts is not exposing the lies on both sides – nor is the priority that of exposing the phoneyes among the peacebuilders. Requirement 3, however, is a clear focus for Peace Counts: it consciously aims to give initiatives a human face. Requirement 4, a focus on solutions, is a central point of Peace Counts. The ten-point list<sup>10</sup> is applied implicitly in many respects in the reports. The North-South divide, the arms race and problems in the media landscape are, however, a lower priority, since Peace

Counts wants to report on targeted examples for peacebuilding and does not (yet) cover the entire spectrum of crisis reporting. The Peace Counts team is, then, “part of the solution” as described by McGoldrick (2000: 19). Since reports are the main medium through which information is reported, the journalist becomes a “participating observer”, as in the description of peace journalism by Lynch (2002).

The concept of peace journalism is controversial among journalists. Simone Richter (1999) interviewed a number of German foreign correspondents. All of them expressed the stereotypical view that journalists report primarily on the actions of the conflict. However, it is vastly preferable to show all sides – the military, the political and the human. Those responsible for Peace Counts do not rely on the concept of peace journalism either. “There is no such thing as peace journalism, it is a chimera,” says Uli Reinhardt. “There is just good journalism or poor journalism.” He much prefers the term “constructive journalism”. Rather than investigative or research journalism, in the Anglo-Saxon style, which uncovers “bad” states of affairs, he does not just seek to expose a problem or corruption but also to offer a solution. This need not be only solutions to conflicts, which is the principal focus of peace journalism, but also ways out of very different crises. A report on the condition of the Alps would, under the premises of “constructive” journalism, also show ways of fulfilling the ecological requirements. Offering solutions is not automatically precluded as a function of conventional investigative journalism but as a function of Peace Counts’ way of “constructive” journalism.

Communication sciences have long offered a term for such a concept – “solutions journalism”. This refers to a still relatively minor trend, particularly in the USA, where mainstream reports tend to feature bad news rather than good news. Instead of pointing out what’s wrong, “solutions journalism” points out what’s right. It doesn’t want to provide some kind of cheerleading in journalism but an example for a better world that people might imitate (Benesch 1998: 36–9).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore there is a relation to the concept of civic journalism (Rosen 1999). It considers journalists and the public as participants in community life and the media as a forum for civic conversation. Of course, to a certain extent the Peace Count team regards itself as a voice of the peacemakers and as a forum for conversation about a conflict. Indeed, the unique aspect of the Peace Counts approach is that stories should also be solution-oriented. A report about the far right, for example, would also show ways in which to stem the spread of the movement.

But what about when there are two conflicting solutions on offer? If, for example, party A wants solution A and party B wants solution B? What are the priorities of the Peace Counts journalist in this case? “He or she looks for people and examples of initiatives that mediate between the two sides to overcome the obstacles,” explains

Reinhardt. People such as Elena Gulmadova who mediated in the civil war between Christians and Muslims in Macedonia. The OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) supports the development of police forces there and wants to achieve a return to dialogue between the two conflicting parties. Elena Gulmadova plays a pivotal role in developing the dialogue between the cultures and this stems from her roots: she is Tajik, her father prays to Allah and her mother to Jesus. Her profession also helps: she is a doctor and diplomat.

However, such people are not so simple to find. “Michael Gleich and I just drove to Macedonia to observe how the OSCE works,” explains Reinhardt. During their research they found Elena Gulmadova. The more they found out about her, the more they were convinced they had found in her a face of reconciliation. So they accompanied her in an armoured vehicle to meet village teachers and demonstrators, to talk to Macedonian soldiers and visit Albanian town halls. Words were among her strongest assets – face to face or on the phone. Her basic formula for peace grows out of this experience: “As long as people are talking to each other, they don’t shoot” (Gerster op cit: 57).<sup>12</sup>

The core principles of peace journalism (McGoldrick 2006; Lee 2008) appear, then, to be practised by the Peace Counts team. But, intriguingly, they do not want to be described as practitioners of peace journalism. The term “peace journalism” is just a label, says Tilman Woertz. In their day-to-day work journalists should concentrate on what is most important. He finds Galtung’s concept “stimulating” while the conflict analysis by peace and conflict researchers, such as Dieter Senghaas or Volker Rittbergern and Michael Zuern (1990), he considers “interesting” too. But Woertz argues that these theories do not help him with his work as a journalist. Nor does he believe that journalists need to develop a deep understanding of different media cultures – as stressed by a range of communications scholars (see Hafez 2002; Hepp 2006; Hahn et al 2008). A lot of experience abroad, empathy, openness and a basic knowledge of the media system in the country where you are working are essential – and sufficient, he maintains. But he stresses that theories are not a matter of great importance for him in his daily work. He says he wants to find out what lies at the heart of the issue and deal with it using journalistic methods.

## **Is the key role of Peace Counts to put the findings from peace and conflict research into practice?**

Peace Counts is a practice-oriented project. There has been no scientific evaluation so far to see whether an audience that has read or heard stories that were



produced in the framework of this project takes another position on conflicts, or whether interest in this type of approach is growing. However, this is essentially of secondary interest to Reinhardt, because he is focused on sustainable quality journalism with maximum levels of professionalism. He was delighted to receive the Peter Becker Prize,<sup>13</sup> awarded to the Journalists' Network, Peace Counts and the Institute for Peace Education in May 2009 by the Centre for Conflict Research<sup>14</sup> and the Philipps University in Marburg for the Peace Counts on Tour initiative.<sup>15</sup> This is not a journalism prize but, with prize money of 10,000 Euros, it is one of the major social sciences awards in Germany.<sup>16</sup> The award was given because the project has managed to apply findings from peace and conflict research and from peace education to the field of professional journalism..

## **To what extent is Peace Counts over-idealistic?**

Showing what is good, presenting peacebuilders: that sounds like idealism. But if you look at the guiding reporting principles the picture changes. The journalistic approach adopted is hardly idealistic in that it is open to different results and ready to revise a theory. For example, the most recent project in the Ivory Coast presents a teacher who mediates in the conflict between two ethnic groups. Reports also explain that a monitoring system of an NGO was not as effective as promised. An observer wanting to idealise the situation would have left this out and simply praised the NGO.

Peace Counts is committed to professional and ethical standards in quality journalism, including balance, thoroughness, independence and critical research, stresses Gleich. "What differentiates us is that we have chosen peace processes as a subject in the same way that other journalists have specialised in the environment, development or sport." Moreover, "an idealistic element comes in sometimes when we directly support (even financially) peace projects that we have found to be exemplary," adds Gleich. There are also parallels here in the German mainstream media, for example, when a public broadcaster, such as ZDF, calls for donations, or a weekly magazine, such as *Stern*, collects for tsunami victims. Another "idealistic aspect" he describes is the desire to pass on his experience of "constructive journalism" by founding an Advanced Journalism Academy.<sup>17</sup>

One of the strong points of Peace Counts is that it handles the subjects of reports skilfully and with a high level of journalistic pragmatism and attentiveness. However, there has been a notable indifference, particularly towards some input from the communication sciences. Theory is useful in revealing practice, describing

it and systematising it. Providing instructions is a matter of secondary concern, although this does sometimes happen specifically in journalism. An example is the concept of public journalism (Rosen op cit) where a journalist consciously intervenes to promote democracy. This concept was developed by a chief editor, David “Buzz” Merrit, of the *Wichita Eagle*, and by a professor of journalism in New York, Jay Rosen. Working on his peace journalism concept, Galtung started up the peace network, Transcend<sup>18</sup> and founded a university in Cluj, Romania. Lynch and McGoldrick also taught there while travelling as foreign correspondents for media including Sky News. They belong to another international network of journalists, Reporting the World,<sup>19</sup> which aims to exchange information on how journalists can continue to provide promote peace and understanding in an increasingly complex world.

“Constructive journalism” represented by Peace Counts could become a further positive example of this. This requires an interest among people working in the theoretical field of journalism studies and the practical world of journalism in dialogue (and research), covering effects as well as standards, roles and functions in journalism. For example, further research should be carried out into the example of the workshops in the Ivory Coast: What experiences did the journalists have there from their perspective? To what extent can these have a sustained influence on their day-to-day work? Did they pass them on to colleagues? All these questions have nothing to do with idealism.

## **Conclusion: Nothing to do with idealism – but real change**

In the meantime almost every large German magazine has bought a Peace Counts story and it has become a brand, partly thanks to the Peter Becker Prize. But it is still a long way from achieving its aim – the attitude of “good news is good news” is spreading slowly but surely. This can be seen in new projects in the Ivory Coast, for example, and in other initiatives and individuals linked by a similar philosophy: The Fondation Hironnelle is one of the groups that is building up new media in crisis areas so that other voices can also be heard.<sup>20</sup>

Andreas Zumach, who has already put this approach into practice as a correspondent for the *Tageszeitung* in Berlin and for the BBC, was named as a representative independent journalist at the UN headquarters in Geneva. He was also recognised for his “services to the promotion of openness to peace”, winning the Goettinger Peace Prize in 2009.<sup>21</sup> All of this involvement confirms an aphorism

by Albert Einstein: “You cannot solve a problem using the same way of thinking that caused it in the first place.” This also has nothing to do with idealism but, rather, with real change.

## Notes

- 1 [www.peace-counts.org](http://www.peace-counts.org).
- 2 <http://www.ifa.de/en/foerderprogramme/zivik/about-zivik/>.
- 3 In addition to information from the websites mentioned, this study is based on interviews with Michael Gleich (Peace Counts), Uli Reinhardt (Peace Counts/Agentur Zeitenspiegel), Tilman Woertz (Peace Counts/Agentur Zeitenspiegel) and Guenther Gugel (Institute of Peace Education Tuebingen).
- 4 [www.zeitenspiegel.de](http://www.zeitenspiegel.de).
- 5 [www.friedenspaedagogik.de](http://www.friedenspaedagogik.de) (Institute of Peace Education, Tuebingen).
- 6 Further key partners are BICC (Bonn International Center for Conversion); the GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit – German Society for Technical Co-operation), which assists with research, forums and exhibitions; UNESCO, which has recognised the project as a contribution to the “International Decade for a Culture of Peace”; WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk), a public broadcaster in Germany; and *zivil*, a magazine for peace and non-violence; the University of Oxford (where Anke Hoeffler evaluated findings on the economic significance of peace processes).
- 7 Amongst others: *Neue Zuercher Zeitung* (Switzerland), *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany), *Brand eins* (Germany), *Focus* (Germany).
- 8 [www.peace-counts-school.org](http://www.peace-counts-school.org).
- 9 Project reports: [www.friedenspaedagogik.de/projekte/peace\\_counts\\_on\\_tour](http://www.friedenspaedagogik.de/projekte/peace_counts_on_tour)
- 10 1) Report all sides; 2) clarify the frame of reference; 3) media ownership should not matter; 4) don't overemphasise certain views; 5) enhance the educational role of news; 6) understand the reality of the arms issue, 7) be attentive to arms race inner dynamism, 8) acknowledge the limitations of the media, 9) consider north-south dynamics, 10) portray clearly the benefits of peace.
- 11 <http://solutionjournalism.com/>, accessed on 24 April 2009.
- 12 In addition to “Elena mediates” there are ten other reports in Gerster (2005), as well as project descriptions.
- 13 <http://www.uni-marburg.de/aktuelles/news/2009a/0218u>, accessed on 22 June 2009.
- 14 [www.uni-marburg.de/konfliktforschung](http://www.uni-marburg.de/konfliktforschung), accessed on 22 June 2009.
- 15 The Peace Counts on Tour initiative is part of the Peace Counts project. Its reports are systematically evaluated.
- 16 <http://www.uni-marburg.de/aktuelles/news/2009a/0218u>, accessed on 22 June 2009.
- 17 <http://aja-online.org/>.

- 18 [www.transcend.org](http://www.transcend.org) .
- 19 [www.reportingtheworld.org](http://www.reportingtheworld.org).
- 20 [www.hirondelle.org](http://www.hirondelle.org); the foundation is based in Lausanne, Switzerland, and was founded in 1995 with support from the Direktion für Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit (DEZA – Committee for Development and Co-operation).
- 21 [www.goettinger-friedenspreis.de](http://www.goettinger-friedenspreis.de).

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