Investigating Conflict-Sensitive Journalism:
Aljazeera News Report on the 2017 Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar

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Abstract: The Rohingya Crisis in 2017 has called for widespread condemnation of Myanmar. However, reports on this event have only escalated tensions. This paper explores the practice of peace/war journalism by an international media, Aljazeera, in reporting such a crisis. To do so, this research utilizes Lynch's peace journalism framework as a standard of conflict-sensitive media. This paper argues that evidence of peace journalism does exist, but other factors imply that war journalism is still strong. Such practice of war journalism has (1) disregarded the crisis' global ramifications; (2) put a narrow context that ignores Myanmar's democratic struggle; (3) portrays conflicting parties' religious relationships as victim-perpetrators; (4) dehumanized Buddhists, monks, and the Myanmar people in general; (5) lacked accounts from grassroots peacemakers; and (6) created an excessive emphasis on elite-level negotiation, particularly in light of pressure from world leaders.

Keywords: Peace Journalism; News Reporting; Rohingya Crisis; Myanmar; Aljazeera.

1. INTRODUCTION

Overcoming the issue of stateless Rohingya people remains a massive homework for the global community nowadays. Securitization of their existence occurred in four countries where they exist: Myanmar as their home country, Bangladesh hosts most Rohingya refugees fleeing across the borders, and Malaysia and Indonesia, which have received a significant number of boat-carried refugees and asylum seekers(Alunaza and Juani, n.d.; Chambers et al. 2018; Paramitaningrum and Fredinata, 2022; Rana and Riaz 2023). This means that regardless of international support for their plight, it doesn't seem that people in many countries are willing to accept them as well.

In Myanmar, the Rohingya people have endured decades of discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity and religion. Numerous nations in Southeast Asia, including as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, have seen hundreds of thousands of refugees flee. Most of them have left for Bangladesh. Since the 1970s, illegal immigrants from Myanmar, known as Rohingya refugees, have been arriving in Bangladesh. Over 250,000 people lived in camps for refugees in Bangladesh throughout the 1990s. Fewer than 20,000 were returned to Myanmar in the early 2000s. Bangladesh has seen a sharp increase in the number of refugees as the recent war in Myanmar has gotten worse. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that since August 25, 2017, about 723,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh.

Recently, Indonesia has been experiencing a blowback after receiving Rohingya refugees in 2017. Massive social media condemnation emerged as a response to their arrival onshore in Aceh province by the end of 2023, which was also welcomed with rejection by the local population (Nuthihar et al. 2024; Raharema 2024). This rejection and condemnation resulted from rampant misinformation and hoaxes in social media that coincided with Indonesia's national election in early 2024 (Aditya, 2024). This was surprising because back in 2017, the Acehnese were accepting Rohingya refugees with an open hand and were proud of such actions (Raharema 2024). It is even more surprising to compare such rejection to locals' and netizens' support of Palestine's plight on social media.

The media itself plays a significant role in shaping the international public's impression of Rohingya in general. At times of conflict, public perception is highly affected by information and news circulating among the population, both among outsiders and, more importantly, for those within the conflict (Mazepus et al. 2023). Especially with the existence of social media, news, and information distribution are accelerated and become more extensive, which attracts quick responses by the population both virtually and in real life (Hu 2023). The existence of journalism should have been able to cover news wisely to prevent escalation and violence from erupting.

Such conflict-sensitive media and journalism practice is not particularly evident in the Rohingya crisis. Recent articles on such topics have demonstrated that peace journalism is generally ignored and that the media failed to provide a peaceful resolution for Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Chittagong province, Bangladesh. Newspapers like Bangladesh Pratidin, New Age, Daily Star, and Daily Prothom Alo have set frames in their reporting that affect the sociopolitical perception of the general Bangladesh population. As such, war journalism persists, and it has driven opinions into rejecting Rohingya (Masud-Un-Nabi 2021). Furthermore, media within Myanmar are designed as propaganda tools for the authoritarian state regime, as journalists encountered severe restrictions by the Myanmar military government, especially in reporting conflict in the area, limited information from the government as well as public persecution, especially by the Rakhine population, thus preventing them from accessing Rohingya (Lynn 2020).

This study aims to explore how international media have affected the Rohingya crisis within Myanmar through its practice in journalism. One article proposed otherwise, that international media such as the New York Times and The Guardian have minimal influence on pressing national government due to pervasive military culture in Myanmar; however, it lacks the detail in perusing how reports in the abovementioned media were instrumentalized instead as propaganda tools (Lee 2021). As an extension, this study will discuss how international media provided sources of provocation by practicing war journalism in its report on the Rohingya crisis. It complements existing literature as it explores the practice of peace/war journalism and how it has affected the direction of conflict in the Rohingya crisis.

2. METHODS

This paper evaluates the practice of Peace/War Journalism by Aljazeera as one of the most prominent sources of news especially considering its popularity in the Middle East. Aljazeera is popular among the world's Muslim population because of its Arabic and English news coverage. Meanwhile, news about Rohingya Muslims will most likely relate to the idea of *ukhuwah islamiyyah* (Muslim solidarity) among Muslims across the world. Therefore, this paper focuses on the use of peace/war journalism because Aljazeera will affect the opinion of international Muslim audiences across the world.

One article entitled "Buddhist protesters block aid to Rohingya" because the potential of its impact is profound. Such a title is highly clickbait, which serves well for news media nowadays to increase viewership. However, the author observes the potential danger that it carries to the direction of the Rohingya conflict and public perception in Myanmar, as well as its potential to be instrumentalized as a tool for propaganda by the Myanmar military junta. This article was released on 21 September 2017, when the crisis was still ongoing.

This research uses Galtung's peace journalism protocol as a theoretical framework to evaluate the practice. Johan Galtung presented the idea of "peace journalism" as a framework to question the news ideals he had previously established in his groundbreaking work (Galtung and Ruge 1965). According to Galtung, peaceful narratives are frequently marginalized in the media because of their excessive obsession with conflict and violence (Galtung, n.d.). As a result, he suggested two different approaches to conflict coverage: peace journalism and war journalism (Galtung, n.d.) According to Galtung, the former type of journalism enables academics and

journalists to view conflict from two perspectives: the "high road" and the "low road." The "low road" refers to the attention on the conflict situation itself, whereas the "high road" refers to the possibilities of peace surrounding a particular conflict situation (Galtung, 2002).

According to Galtung, peace journalism emphasizes the promotion of peace initiatives and downplays disagreements between parties in order to resolve issues amicably. However, war journalism encourages the use of violence to end the conflict by highlighting the disparities between the opposing sides. According to Galtung, peace journalism places an emphasis on nonviolent activities, humanitarian concerns, and the prevention of violence and war (Galtung, n.d.) On the other hand, war journalism emphasizes the theatre of conflict, fosters a diversionist mindset, and dehumanizes the other side in the hope that a ceasefire and victory will bring about peace (Galtung, 2002)

Galtung proposed that peace journalism may have been a major factor in the war's resolution in Northern Ireland, claiming that if this strategy had been used earlier, the conflict would have moved into a more peaceful phase.(Galtung, Johan 1998) He specifically claims that peace journalism is more likely to aid in the establishment of peace by emphasizing non-violent outcomes, encouraging empathy for all parties involved, and encouraging innovation in reporting. This viewpoint emphasizes how peace journalism has the potential to be an effective instrument in resolving disputes and advancing peace. Clarke examined print media in South Africa that was written in English and confirmed Galtung's claim (Hyde-Clarke, 2022).

War Journalism	Peace Journalism
Visible effects of war: Casualties, dead and wounded	**Reports on invisible effects of conflict**: Emotional trauma, damage to society, damage to property and culture
Elite-oriented: Focuses on leaders and elites as actors and sources of information	**People-oriented**: Focuses on common people as actors and sources of information
Differences-oriented: Reports leads to the conflict	**Solution-oriented**: Reports leads to solution to the conflict
Here and now: Reporting on the war arena	**Causes and consequences of the conflict**: Reporting on the causes and future effects of the conflict.
Dichotomy: Good and bad people or viction and villain	**Avoid good vs. bad tagging**: Not labelling anyone
Two party orientation: One party wins and one party loses	**Multi-party orientation**: Gives voice to many parties involved in conflict
Partisan-oriented: Biased for one party of the conflict	**Nonpartisan**: Neutral, not taking any side
Zero-sum orientation: One goal: to win	**Win-win oriented:** Many goals and issues. Solution oriented
Uses of demonizing language: Use of language such as barbaric, brutal, inhuman, extremist, terrorist.	**Avoids demonizing language:** Report on more precise descriptions, name, and titles that the people give themselves.

Table 1. Protocol of Peace Journalism (Galtung, n.d.)

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To analyze existing media coverage regarding the Rohingya crisis in relation to war journalism (WJ) and peace journalism (PJ), there are two different types of news in relation to the Rohingya crisis: one that circulates in Myanmar with government propaganda dominates the narrative. At the same time, the other is international news that attracts condemnation toward

Myanmar (Hanitzsch 2004). This writing will comment on the second type, which eventually influences the direction of the Rohingya crisis.

Based on the content analysis of articles about the blockade on aid shipment in Sittee from various sources, evidence of PJ exists, but many elements suggest that WJ remains strong. Elements of WJ found in articles include (1) the lack of attention to international impact and its blowback to this crisis; (2) limited context that neglects Myanmar's struggle toward democracy; (3) depiction of religious relation of conflicting parties into victim-perpetrators dichotomy; (4) dehumanization of Buddhists, monks and Myanmar people in general; (5) absence of grassroots peacemakers' account; and (6) too much focused-on elite-level negotiation especially pressures from world leaders (Lynch 2013).

The way that reporters illustrate the conflict tends to create a negative image of Buddhist followers in Myanmar, especially monks, as the culprits of this conflict, suggesting operationalization of what Lynch called the 'us-them' perspective that indicates WJ (Lynch 2013). In an article covering this event, an Al Jazeera reporter repeatedly mentions the words 'Buddhist' and 'mob', as evident in Illustration 1, to refer to protesters in the event, suggesting a negative image of this side of the conflict (Aljazeera 2017). The Merriam-Webster online dictionary refers to 'mob' as a large and disorderly crowd of people with a side note 'especially one bent on riotous or destructive action.' Mob is also understood as the frantic crowd, moved by emotions, especially anger. It comprises people who lower or throw away their personal standards to join a ruthless and often irresponsible crowd for a cause (Bogardus, 1924; Martin, 2014). Such words deepened international readers' impression of Buddhists, especially after the release of Time magazine's "Face of Buddhist Terror," which highlights the role of Wirathu, a radical but highly influential monk in Myanmar, in inciting hatred toward the Muslim population in the Mandalay Riot 2014 (Oppenheim, 2017).

A 300-strong **mob** of **Buddhist** protesters in Rakhine's capital Sittwe gathered late on Wednesday at a jetty where a boat carrying relief goods was preparing to travel upriver to Maungdaw, Reuters news agency said.

The **mob forced** the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) to unload the aid from the boat and prevented the vessel from leaving, state-backed Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported on Thursday, quoting Myanmar's Information Committee.

Illustration 1. The use of words 'Buddhist' and 'mob' side-by-side with negative connotations
(Brisel, 2017)

In this case, despite being correct in depicting Rohingya as victims, many other victims, especially among Rakhine people, are left unreported. It implies that most reporters, and thus suggesting the international community, side with the plight of Rohingya. Abroad, not only has this news attracted empathy, which reporters intentionally do, but condemnation and strong hatred toward Buddhists also arose. Citing an example from an article by Robert Brisel from the Independent, not only that readers likely to feel sad that Rohingya are 'hiding in fear of being caught up, without food and other supplies', but also angry or resentful knowing that even Buddhists/Rakhine people even have no mercy by violently trying to stop the aid for Rohingya

(Brisel, 2017). Unsurprisingly, many enraged Muslims reacted by preparing for jihad – which means *'fight'* in Arabic – to fight for their fellow Muslims in Myanmar (Hodge and Rayda, 2017). This strong reaction from Muslims in Indonesia, coupled with provocative social media content that incites hatred toward Buddhists, in turn, draws a defensive backlash from Myanmar.

Creating an image of the entire Myanmar population as violent Buddhists and distributing such an image internationally did invite recalcitrant reaction from within Myanmar society, as Burmese people believe that what has been spread globally is 'fake news' (McPherson, 2017). Myanmar readers at home would tend to be furious as their name and their leader are being named and shamed in international fora. Further, what they believe to be religious leader, those who lead them in their faith, which is oftentimes very personal, are considered violent abroad. Consequently, as these people have been fed with claims made by their own government, the reaction tends to be defensive, saying that the circulated news is made-believe and manipulated (McPherson, 2017). Even worse, Al Jazeera and several news media put the word "Buddhist" in their titles about the blockade on aid shipments, bringing every Buddhist in Myanmar into the perpetrator side of the story (Aljazeera 2017). Counter-claims by Suu Kyi, supported by Burmese, further dehumanize them in the eyes of the international community, portraying Myanmar society as people who cold-bloodedly let Rohingya suffer and even cause them agony (Lynch 2013). Growing mistrust among Myanmar society toward international actors will only eschew them away from peace negotiations instead of bringing them to the negotiation table.

Furthermore, most stories are from elite sides, especially world leaders commenting on Suu Kyi's stance. Among those whose comments appeared in the news are Henry Van Thio as Myanmar's second vice president, US President Donald Trump, France's President Emmanuel Macron, Bangladeshi PM Sheikh Hasina, and ICRC's Myanmar spokesperson Cecilia Goin, as apparent in The Australian's article covering this event (Hodge and Rayda, 2017). Stories from Rohingya refugees and the Rakhine populace exist, but comments from those directly involved in the protest, either as protesters, ordinary Rohingya, or Rakhine, are mostly absent. Consequently, there's a lack of representation, especially regarding peacemaking efforts in the grassroots that might become solutions for the ongoing conflict.

To apply PJ to this news, several aspects are considered in the making of the above article that distinguish it from another similar report: religious dichotomy must be omitted, focus on peacemakers from every side will have to be highlighted, and a different framing must be used. What needs to be understood in looking at this case is that Myanmar people have fears toward militarized Rohingya, that these so-called illegal immigrants will put their society in jeopardy as Myanmar people's memory about Islam has been distorted by the existence of (and misrepresentation of Islam by) terrorist network (McPherson, 2017). This growing fear was utilized so much that they viewed themselves almost as victims of terrorist threats, accusing ARSA of having links with al-Qaeda and ISIL (Edroos 2017). Therefore, in reporting the development of the Rohingya crisis, it's important to put Myanmar's position not only as perpetrator but also as victim to bring 'Buddhists' back into the human realm. To operate this, the first step would be to replace the term Buddhist with more neutral terms based on contexts, like protesters or simply the Rakhine people.

In addition, stories about Buddhist peacemakers' stories would need to be raised. Pre-existing news have seen vast condemnation of Buddhists and monks, and it has obviously attracted hatred toward them. Although they are indeed Buddhists, to bring that identity in an article that tells their violent actions would tend to make people generalize that all Buddhists are violent. To break that judgment, there must be balancing information that portrays them as peaceful beings. Thus, stories about Buddhists who fight for the plight of Rohingya people would neutralize any extreme view about Buddhists (McPherson, 2017). In this case, the word 'Buddhists' needs to be mentioned to emphasize their involvement in peacemaking efforts.

Moreover, news about the existence of peacemaker Buddhists would also inflict hope among readers that there's a possibility of making peace through these hands.

On the other side of the conflict, introducing ARSA's perspective and actions toward peace, including the humanitarian crisis, would raise their position among readers. ARSA indeed engaged in the battle, but their attention to the Rohingya people's suffering means that they're not being blindly violent, which might indicate that they're not terrorizing people (Naqvi 2017). Aside from balancing information about peacemaker Buddhists, raising this issue would re-humanize ARSA. Those who read the article would feel that there is hope from both sides to bring peace back into Rakhine.

More importantly, the context that Myanmar is going toward democracy must not be ignored. Many articles tend to cut the story off from Myanmar's as well as Suu Kyi's decades-long struggle for freedom, as many have been disappointed in her due to her silence toward the Rohingya issue. Bringing democratization into conversation means that the current political system is a work in progress that requires continuous revision. It means that changes might still occur. The picture brought to the public is that Suu Kyi is still struggling for that; with peace talks with insurgents and with her current position in the Myanmar government, she would have to maintain public support so that her struggle would not end in vain. Understanding her struggle is difficult, and her position obliged her to act carefully; readers would endure accusing her of turning her back on democracy.

Although this article does not target local Myanmar, those who read it would sympathize with the last part about their struggle toward democracy and the existence of pacifier monks among them. Monks have had leverage in Myanmar. Therefore, the exposure of peacemaker monks to the public would encourage the silent moderate majority of Myanmar people who want to fight for full democracy that embraces people regardless of ethnicity (Walton 2015). As civil society rises, it will bring them to associate and disseminate alternative perspectives among ordinary Myanmar people.

To summarize, existing media coverage that attracts hatred toward Myanmar people needs to be replaced by carefully crafted news that brings peacemakers, Buddhists, and monks to the front. Negative images of Buddhists have incited hatred from Muslims worldwide, and their reaction has even worsened the situation in Myanmar. To tackle this problem, the news served for the international community must provide them with the context that Myanmar is undergoing a long-time struggle toward democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi. That way, support will come not only for Rohingya but also for the entire Myanmar nation.

4. CONCLUSION

An analysis of media coverage of the Rohingya crisis reveals two contrasting narratives: one driven by Myanmar's government propaganda and the other by international condemnation. The focus here is on the latter, which influences the direction of the crisis. Content analysis of news about aid blockades in Sittwe shows elements of both war journalism (WJ) and peace journalism (PJ). While some articles exhibit PJ characteristics, WJ aspects are predominant. WJ features include limited context, victim-perpetrator framing, and emphasis on elite negotiations, neglecting grassroots peacemakers. The portrayal of Buddhist followers in Myanmar, particularly monks, as instigators of conflict, reinforces an 'us-them' perspective, characteristic of WJ. Negative depictions of Buddhists in international media fuel anger and resentment, escalating tensions.

The global response to the crisis has been emotionally charged, with empathy for Rohingya and animosity towards Buddhist/Rakhine people. This has sparked preparations for jihad among Muslims and defensive reactions from Myanmar, who dismiss global coverage as 'fake news'. The demonization of Buddhists and Myanmar society exacerbates mistrust, hindering peace

negotiations. Coverage skewed toward elite perspectives overlooks grassroots efforts toward peace, perpetuating one-sided narratives. To promote peace journalism, the focus should shift towards peacemakers on all sides while avoiding religious dichotomies and reframing terminology to humanize all parties.

In addition, stories of Buddhist peace activists and efforts, alongside insights into ARSA's humanitarian concerns, can balance perspectives and foster hope for reconciliation. Acknowledging Myanmar's democratic transition and Suu Kyi's ongoing struggles can offer insight into the situation's complexities and promote understanding.

By showcasing the diversity of perspectives within Myanmar society, including peacemaking monks, and highlighting ongoing democratic progress, media coverage can foster empathy and support for a peaceful resolution. This nuanced approach can challenge negative stereotypes, promote dialogue, and encourage engagement with diverse voices in the conflict. Ultimately, a shift toward peace journalism can help reshape perceptions, inspire reconciliation efforts, and build a more inclusive narrative for Myanmar's future.

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