

Israeli PJ course shifts to Zoom during pandemic

By Ruth Ebenstein

Peace journalism is now being taught in Israel in the virtual classroom.

Since early July 2020, some seventy people—Jewish and Arab Israelis, women and men from across the country, ranging in age from 20-something to 70-something—have gathered on Zoom to learn the principles and practices of Peace Journalism. It’s an engaging assembly, with chitchat in Hebrew and Arabic before the lectures begin, and a flurry of conversation in the chat boxes throughout, swapping opinions and sharing perspectives. With many participants dialing in from home, one is privy to the little touches of abode: a colorful collection of magnets covering every corner of a family-size refrigerator, a dainty collection of tea cups tucked behind a glass china cabinet, and the accidental shout of a family member when the mute button slips off, or a cat slinking by.

Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, participants studied Peace Journalism by going away for the weekend. This very same course was taught over three intensive face-to-face weekends at hotels and guest houses where participants congregated to study, socialize, debate and connect. They also learned hands-on journalistic skills of interviewing, how to structure a

journalistic story, how to edit. I know this because I took this very course in 2019, and got to partake in that no-longer-safe physical togetherness that we took for granted in the Pre-Corona Era when it was as plentiful as oxygen.

But shifting the course to Zoom has been surprisingly smooth and successful. It’s involved quite a bit of learning as well as its own kind of magic.

Complex is the program’s official name: “Media Impacting Conflict Transformation: From Local Action to Cross-border and Global Outreach.” It is the brainchild of The Adam Institute for Democracy and Peace, an educational NGO that promotes peace, human/civil rights, tolerance and coexistence across religious, ethnic and national groups in Israel and the region. The Adam Institute has partnered with Israel Social Television, an independent media NGO promoting social change via video content, dissemination and media training for social activists. Support for this program comes from the European Union. It draws an admixture of participants, including journalists from mainstream and independent media, social activists, communication students, spokespeople, artists, and other media-related professions.

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The curriculum comprises lectures as well as theoretical and practical workshops. The larger group is divided into three smaller groups, with each section learning under the guidance of two facilitators: one Jewish, one Arab. In the smaller workshops, Jewish and Arab participants can process the lectures, voice their perspective, deepen their knowledge and engage in a group discussion. Group facilitators use the unique, award-winning “Betzavta” – Adam Institute’s group facilitation method”, which transforms conflicts into dilemmas. (Betzavta means “Together” in Hebrew). This method allows for greater depth to the discussion.

The course kicked off on July 1 with a lecture by Eetta Prince-Gibson, former Editor-in-Chief of *The Jerusalem Report* and Deputy Bureau Chief for *The Washington Post*, presenting on the topic, “What is Peace Journalism?” The award-winning journalist and editor introduced participants to Johan Galtung, the Norwegian sociologist who founded the discipline of peace and conflict studies and peace journalism. Prince-Gibson also explained its connection to Solutions Journalism, which is rigorous reporting about

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Saber Rabi, Educational Director of the Adam Institute’s Peace journalism program, welcoming the 70 Jewish and Arab participants on Zoom.



A sign welcomes PJ workshop participants (left); A group photos of Arab and Jewish peace journalism course participants.



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responses to social problems that explains and investigates how people work toward solutions. Prince-Gibson opened the door to exploring the very meaning of the field, and the goals of the course.

Teaching the practical application was Ehud Shem Tov, co-CEO of SOCIAL TV, who shared shared SOCIAL TV’s version of peace journalism. He screened a series of clips, including some created by alumni of previous cohorts of the Peace Journalism program. Chen Peter, co-CEO, shared particulars of the program and gave examples of how to conduct an interview on Zoom.

Other critical learning blocks included fleshing out the narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Enthralling and engaging were the presentations in late July: the Zionist Israeli narrative and the Palestinian narrative. Yisraela Oron, one of the founders of the Geneva Initiative and deputy head of the National Security Council, presented the former. Dr. Yousef Asfour, historian, lecturer and researcher in the field of the philosophy of education, presented the latter.

In mid-September the topic centered on the exclusion of women from the peace discourse, with compelling presentations by Dr. Sarai Aharoni of Ben-Gurion University, who specializes in feminist security studies, women and peace processes. Also presenting on the role of women in peacemaking was Nabila Espanioly, a psychologist, politician and activist.

On the roster of upcoming topics: Mizrahi Jews and their role in promoting peace in the past and present; the double exclusion of Bedouins and Palestinian citizens of Israel from the peace process; ultra-Orthodox and their stance on the peace process; and citizens from the Former Soviet Union, their narrative on the peace process and stance on possible solutions. The lectures are slated to wrap up in November. Corona-permitting, the course will culminate with a three-day workshop that will allow for considerable hands-on learning, meeting of professional journalists, discussion of ethics, and getting-to-know-you.

During these trying times, when people are locked down at home and physically going out less, let alone

crossing borders less, it is affirming to know that there are programs exploring ways to use technology to reach across the divide. To continue to create artistic work together, to dismantle stereotypes.

Some serious questions arise in the group discussions. Can Peace Journalism ever match the ratings of War Journalism? If not, what can we do about it? What is the significance of granting legitimacy to these voices that are left out of the conversation, and how can we change that? Also compelling is the array of definitions given to Peace Journalism, what it means and what it can do.

There seems to be consensus around this: war journalism reports on differences rather than similarities whereas peace journalism layers the “us” and “them” with additional elements. Rather than focusing on what we have, peace journalism focuses on what we need to have, what ought to be. This new online course in Peace Journalism is a much-needed step as Israelis and Palestinians, and all people all over, must find a way forward together.