Introduction

The task of this first chapter is to frame the state of the relations between media operation and social change, in order to fully place the discussion about journalism and its role in conflict transformation within current dynamics and tendencies. As not all aspects of these relations can be captured here, the chapter offers a walk through selected examples and past research, which help to highlight some of the most important peculiarities and contradictions in the interactions between journalists and their representations on one hand, and events represented (or not) in the news on the other. The chapter thus examines the many different ways in which journalism and the concept of change can be looked at; it debunks simplistic visions of journalism as a detached observer; and it reveals how news reporting is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural contexts in which practitioners live. The complexity highlighted through this contextualisation provides a clear sense of the challenges that transformative models like peace journalism face in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. These challenges are further historically contextualised in Chapter 2, which is dedicated to the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and their associated narratives since the first Intifada in 1987. Together, these two chapters provide the macro-analytical contextualisation framing the analysis presented in Chapters 3 to 6. In particular, this first chapter provides a conceptual frame for the ethnographic material on grassroots peace promotion and journalists’ perspectives on this conflict.

The first section explains how the media look for change in the form of new developments to cover without acknowledging that journalism covers conflicts in a highly social way, which may impact on
opportunities for transforming them. The chapter also discusses examples from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, highlighting how media coverage has interacted with new political narratives about the conflict. The peace journalism project is then introduced and the ways in which it aims to reshape the links between journalism and change are outlined. The chapter concludes with a discussion of general aspects of peace journalism that need to be considered to enhance its impact specifically on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The links between journalism and change

Change is at the core of journalism. Journalism gradually became the profession we know today in times of profound transformation in Western countries, especially since the second half of the 19th century. Its foundations were laid at a time when new economic and political conventions were taking root and developing, particularly the growing involvement of the middle classes in politics and the transition from radical journalism to a modern market-based practice (Conboy 2004: 109–127). Journalism found its “objective” informative role in the support of new beliefs and institutions, the modern democratic representative system that required citizens to choose among different political solutions and representatives, guaranteeing the functioning of this system (Schudson 2001: 160–161). Current definitions of journalism present the profession as a detached provider of information for the public, supporting citizens in their public life and choices. Journalists are detached in the sense that they do not interfere with these choices. In order to guarantee this political neutrality, they avoid promoting partisan representations and only present what they see as “facts”. Schudson defines journalism as “the business or practice of regularly producing and disseminating [...] information and commentary on contemporary affairs”, whose aim is to include audiences “in a discourse taken to be publicly important” (Schudson 2011: 3). Zelizer explains that journalists see their profession as arising from a “news sense” or “nose for news”, as being a container “holding information for the public”. They see the news as a mirror reflecting “all that happens” and they see themselves “as caretakers of the news”, thus providing a service to the community (2004b: 29–32). Allan speaks of the “liberal pluralist conception of the journalist’s role in modern society” as that of “ensuring that members of the public are able to draw upon a diverse ‘market place of ideas’” (2004: 47). These journalistic definitions of the media role are based on two main assumptions. The first is the idea