

## **“Media in times of conflict: Did someone Say Objectivity?”**

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Two selected speeches:

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Photo source: Wikipedia

As all of you Europeans know, Arabic is a fiendishly difficult language. European languages are almost completely different from Arabic, so as a student of Arabic you get very, very few words for ‘free’. Almost every language in the world borrows from others, so words like ‘terrorism’, ‘tourism’ or ‘sex’ are similar in, say, Russian, Bahasa Indonesia and Swahili.

But not in Arabic, the language that even came up with its own word for ‘communism’. And so every European student of Arabic has to memorize and memorize and memorize. Hard work, and so one is very fortunate when in a conversation a particular word is used with such urgency or vehemence that one remembers it right away, never to lose it again.

For me this happened with the Arabic word for vocabulary.

It was the end of 2001. People were still recovering from 9/11, the second intifadah was in full swing and I was sitting in front of a Hezbollah editor here in Beirut. I was doing a piece on Al-Manar, the TV-station that was then beginning to make waves. We sat down and when I asked my first question the one-word

answer came out with such force that it stayed with me ever since. The question was: What makes Al-Manar different from other media, and the reply was one word: Mustalahat!

Mustalahat, or vocabulary. And the Hezbollah editor was right. Hezbollah had its own terminology for what was going on in the region. The Zionist enemy, Occupied Palestine, The Islamic Resistance, the occupation troupes... Mustalahat. It reminded me of a discovery I had made earlier in Lebanon, namely that there were almost as many names for the country's recent past as there were sects and political movements: some said it had been a civil war, others called it the Lebanese war, others the war of Lebanon, others the war for Lebanon, others the Lebanese chapter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict... Small wonder most Lebanese settled for the deliberately vague term *al-ahdath*, the events.

Around the time I spoke to that Hezbollah editor, I was assigned the second intifadah, and as I travelled there and spoke to people, followed their media and read their slogans and propaganda, the importance of mustalahat truly hit me.

Was it a Palestinian, an Arab or a Muslim who threw that stone? Was he shot, brutally murdered or rather eliminated by a Zionist warcriminal, by a member of the Israeli defence forces, or by an Israeli occupation soldier? Where did all this happen? In Israel, in the Zionist Entity, in Occupied Palestine, in the Waqf Palestine? Were we talking about the peace-process, or about the 'so-called peace-process'? Were these occupied territories, or *the* occupied territories? Or should we call them disputed territories, liberated territories, Judea and Samaria, or the Palestinian territories?

Of course I had been familiar with the phrase 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'. What I hadn't realized was that the issue went deeper than naming. These vocabularies were more than different labels for the same package. Together these vocabularies constituted Perspectives, World-Views or meta-narratives that explained to its adherents what the conflict really was all about, its causes, the bad guys and the good guys, and what ought to be done to solve things. Naturally each perspective put its adherents in the centre of the world, and presented its own position as that of the good guy.

A Labour politician in Israel may be convinced that essentially this is a dispute about land. So Israel and the Palestinians enter into 'negotiations' in which Israel is to 'give up' part of the disputed land, leading to a just and lasting settlement. Sounds reasonable, a dispute solved by negotiations and some give and take. At the same time a secular Palestinian may believe the conflict to be about the illegal occupation of land. That land has to be given 'back', not 'up' because you cannot negotiate about something that isn't yours. This sounds equally reasonable, occupation necessitating the return of what is occupied. I also encountered religious Jewish fundamentalists who believed the land was not disputed or occupied, but liberated, given by God to the Jewish people. For them the conflict was not about land but about faith. And talk about undoing God's will by handing the land over to non-Jews was paramount to suicide: what people would go against God's wishes? And how could a process designed to go against God's will, be called a peace-process?

I could go on like this, with the vocabulary and perspective of the religious Muslim Palestinian groups, that of religious Christian groups, that of the Atheist left in Israel and Palestine... And why stop there? The conflict between Al-Qaida and the US in Iraq presents a similar panorama of mustalahat. Are these coalition forces, occupation forces, Anglo-American forces in Iraq? Is Al-Qaida a terrorist group, or are they leading the resistance against Western interference in

their region? And is that region the Arab world, or the Middle-East, or the Arab province of the Umma?

Mustalahat, and the consequences are far-reaching. Because once you realise how differently one can interpret one and the same day in the Middle-East, you become very uncomfortable with the notion that as a journalist you can be objective.

Let me give you my definition of objectivity. In my view you have reported a conflict neutrally when all parties concerned subscribe to *your* summary of *their* position, or point of view. This sounds straightforward, that is, until you turn on your computer and have to start making choices: whose words do you use in the Holy Land, to use that term rather than Israel, Zionist Entity or occupied Palestine. You could adopt the vocabulary of the UN, but then there are parties to the conflict that do not recognize the UN. Moreover there is no unanimity at the UN, with disputes over the interpretation of, for example, the phrase 'lands occupied in 1967'.

Things get even more troubling when you have to decide not how to describe facts, but to choose which facts to cover, and from what angle? How can a journalist report a given day in the Middle-East in a way that satisfies all parties concerned, when these parties have entirely different and non-compatible ideas of what facts are news, and why they are news, and which parties should be heard about these facts?

Israeli governments take the view that right now the conflict is about terrorism, so for them every Israeli killed by a Palestinian terrorist attack is breaking news. The Palestinian Authorities claim that the conflict is about occupation, which makes every Palestinian killed as a result of the Israeli occupation headline news for them... So which attack does one report, and if one reports both, whose blood should one show first, followed by comment by which parties? Does one ask the usual government and Authority spokesmen? Or the Israeli opposition as well as the Palestinian? If so, which opposition parties? Or should one perhaps hear the side of the Israeli peace-movement, and if so, which of its 234 branches? And once one has made up one's mind which parties to exclude, what question to put to the ones that are included?

And remember this dilemma is not exclusive to the Holy Land. On the contrary. Take the war between Al-Qaida and the US government. When Osama bin Laden issues another video, is this news? I suppose so, that is if you believe the war on terror is a genuine attempt to catch or kill bin Laden, because the video proves that the hunt is still unsuccessful. From what angle do you then cover the video? Is the overarching question whether the video is genuine? Is the angle: does this video help the US government catch Bin Laden? Or is the angle: what is he really saying in this video, and what is the US government's response to bin Laden's denouncement of Western support for today's Arab Pinochets?

I remember the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003. I was in Kuwait then, and the meta-narrative in the Western media was: will the Americans succeed in bringing democracy to Iraq? This meta-narrative informed the vocabulary employed by Western media – remember 'winning the hearts and minds'? - as well as most story-lines. Yet in Kuwait I discovered that when people saw American troops race through their squares and highways, they had a rather different question on their minds: is the US genuinely interested in democracy? And if so, why do the dictators in countries like Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco receive all the US and EU support, and not the democratic opposition? This was a diametrically opposed angle on the Iraq war, and it has hardly

surfaced in Western media, before the war, during the war or after the war. If it had, we would see very different story-lines. For example, the decision of Congress to continue for another year the two billion 'aid' to the dictatorship of Egypt, might be headline news, rather than five lines on page four.

This conference is about objectivity in times of war, and to me that means asking how we journalists can represent the Middle-East to our audience in such a way that all parties concerned would subscribe to our summary of their point of view? My answer: this is impossible. In order to represent we are forced to select information, to highlight some interpretations and leave out others, and we have to cast all this in language that is inherently subjective. This is why one can tell fundamentally different stories about one and the same day in the Middle-East, stories with diametrically opposed implications and concomitant sympathies. When one watches CNN International it is difficult not to side with Israeli Labour politicians because their perspective is almost identical to that of CNN. Same with Hezbollah when you watch only Al-Manar, or with the White House when you follow Fox News's selection of topics, angles, vocabulary and sides to hear.

We live in a global village these days, in which a sermon in Fallujah is seen by my Moroccan neighbour in Amsterdam, live and direct. It is a global village but, to borrow a phrase from AUC mediaprofessor Lawrence Pintak: our global village has become ghettoized. Each ghetto watches its own media, which reinforce that ghetto's idea of itself as the good guys. In the prevailing perspective of Western massmedia, a member of Islamic Jihad or a religious Jewish settler is almost exclusively defined as an enemy or opponent of peace. Do we really believe that an Islamic Jihad fighter or a National Religious Party activist gets up in the morning and asks himself: how can I destroy peace today? Of course not, these people believe they are fighting *for* peace, not against it. And were we to adopt their vocabulary, their selection and interpretation of Major Historical Events and their take on the news, we would see things the same way.

I am reaching the end of my talk and I hope you're not expecting solutions. Because I don't have any. But the problem is real and the first thing we quality journalists need to do is to tell our marketing departments to stop advertising our work as objective. It isn't, it can't be.

Then, and I realise how ambitious it sounds: we need to start looking for new journalistic genres, new narrative techniques to do justice to all the different ways one can interpret the Middle-East. As the arts and social sciences discovered long ago, all representation is subjective. This is not the media's fault, but it is our responsibility to share with our audiences that we bring not objective truth, but a version of the truth. The next step would be to explain our criteria for the particular selection or version we chose, followed by periodic explanations of these other perspectives, and how a given news event is interpreted by adherents of that perspective.

Only in this way we can break out of our ghetto. How to do it in a practical day-to-day newsroom kind of way, I do not know. But of one thing I am sure: at some point we are going to see a journalist or an artist or a communication guru or a new prophet who pulls it off. Who finds the narrative key to what one may call a meta-perspective, e.g. a Perspective within which one can represent all other Perspectives. And when this meta-perspective is discovered, it will be like a great piece of art: before a great piece of art comes into existence no one can

imagine anything like it. But once it has been created, no one can imagine a world without it.

**Joris Luyendijk** (born [1971](#) in [Amsterdam](#)) is a [Dutch non-fiction author](#), [news correspondent](#) and [talk show host](#).

Joris Luyendijk has studied in [Kansas](#), [Amsterdam](#), and [Cairo](#). He earned his [Master's degree](#) equivalent "doctoraal" degree in [Cairo](#). His first book *Een goede man slaat soms zijn vrouw* ([1998](#), *A good man will sometimes hit his wife*) is about the [Egyptian](#) society from a Western foreigner point of view.

Then he became a [news correspondent](#) in the [Middle East](#) of which he is now retired. He was stationed in [Egypt](#), [Lebanon](#), and [Israel](#). He also reported on the [Second Gulf War](#) in [Iraq](#). His book *Het zijn net mensen* ([2006](#), *They are just like people*) is about his experiences as a news correspondent in the Middle East.

Currently Joris Luyendijk lives in Amsterdam. In the summer of 2006 he did interviews for the [talk show](#) *Zomergasten* (*Summer Guests*).

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## REFLECTIONS ON FAIR REPORTING IN THE FIELD

Lasse Ellegaard  
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Photo: Torben Brandt/IMS

First of all I'd like to thank our Lebanese host, al Akbar, International Media Support and associated parties, who kindly invited me here to speak about the issues, who confronts a foreign correspondent in strange and some time unfriendly environments.

And as you probably know, Danish reporters are no longer spared harassment in this part of the world, due to the Cartoon Crisis, and also a Danish governments decision to fight alongside 'the coalition of the willing' in Iraq.

It was not always like that. In a more cozy past Danish journalist was well received abroad. We had this reputation of being friendly sponsors of development aid and democracy. When I travelled with Mujahedin-forces in Afghanistan back in the eighties, filming a Danish medical team in the Helmand Province, I carried a letter with my newspaper's logo and typed in Russian, confident that in case I happened to bump into the soviet-forces of that time, they would accept me as a strictly neutral observer and, in fact, a neighbour in the Baltic Sea.

Well, the neutral part wasn't quite the case as the journey was partly paid for by an anticommunist organisation called The Committee for supporting Afghanistan. When the people of this committee read my articles, they decided not to invite me again.

The reason was, that I chose to place my solidarity with journalism – knowing that lack of intimate knowledge of the environment, I was working in – the Helmand Province and its people – left the reporting to what I could see and hear. The Danish afghan committee was not amused. In short: I reported as a reporter, not the pink and sentimental picture of the muslim fighters, some of my sponsors wished I'd seen and heard.

This is the condition for the form, we usually call parachute-journalism and to an extent it's the overall condition for western correspondents working in for instance the arab world.

My reporting is NOT strictly objective – no reporting is strictly objective, as we have heard on this seminar. But my reporting is always true, which of course is not the same as objectivity, although some times close. When the correspondent perceives and absorbs information from different sources, he or she can only treat them from his own point of view, his platform, so to speak, which is placed in his own background.

This said, I believe that any reporter has one obligation: To be true to himself and his own judgements in reporting from foreign environments. Not as an artist or a poet or whatever, but within all the professional obligations, journalism requires.

In the process he will constantly have to remind himself of what poultry-breeders in Denmark has named as 'The Lombardian Rooster'.

Who is the Lombardian Rooster? In my youth this particular Rooster was pictured on the cover of Danish Poultry-Breeders yearbook – a very handsome bird, which of course didn't exist outside the fine and artistic drawing on the cover of the yearbook. The trick was, that the Lombardian Rooster was the very idea of the ideal rooster – a fantasy-bird, whom all poultry-breeders would spend a lifetime to try to achieve.

Likewise with journalism – if we are not trying to achieve the ultimate objectivity, we end up as disgraces to our profession. We end up as people – not of the press but of shameful propaganda. But as I said – we will never get there, we will never reach the point of pure objectivity, but my point is: We shall never stop trying.

But it is surely getting harder these days.

When I started out covering conflicts, mainly in the Muslim world, I was able to move around relatively freely among the different factions – I was *sahafe*, the Arabic term for press, which I shouted out from the car-window when passing checkpoints, protected only by my national credentials as a peaceful Dane, an international press card, or maybe a piece of paper, issued from some dusty press-office in the area.

We work in a very different world today. The whole picture has changed with the doctrine of what Mr. Blair has described as 'liberal intervention' on a global level, and we the western reporters is viewed are affiliated with this policy. Therefore we are seen as 'enemies from the West', but equally important: When reporting about wrong behaviour of the West – as it is the case with Iraq – we are approached by our own governments, some times even of our readers, as unpatriotic, we become enemies - delivering arguments and ammunition to the insurgents, rebels, fundamentalists, et cetera.

Danes – and thus Danish reporters – have entered the global map of conflict, so it was also a matter of personal interest, when I bumped into a comment, written by Robert Fisk, the Beirut-correspondent of the newspaper, 'The Independent', with a headline saying: 'We are now in the firing line, sadly.'

Fisk was writing about his job as a reporter. And apart from the fact, that it has become more dangerous to cover conflicts and his message was, that both the individual western journalist and what can be described as western media-hemisphere in general – share much of the responsibility for the current grave realities.

It is partly our own fault that western journalists today are approached in the worlds killing fields as participants rather than neutral observers.

This is confirmed to chilling degree in a recent report, 'Killing The Messenger' by INSI (International News Safety Institute), which notes: 'Recognition of journalists as neutral observers has largely gone. Increasingly journalists covering international conflicts are identified with their countries or are seen as 'either with us or against us'.

The report are recommending political and practical measures to tackle the problems: Lack of punishment of perpetrators, lack of understanding of the operational requirements between military and media in covering of conflicts, employers sending badly trained and inexperienced reporters into wars – and a lack of responsibility in the reporting itself.

Nobody in his right mind can argue against these recommendations, but the point here is, that even with all these precautions fulfilled, there is still a major problem left, namely the media-organisations affiliation with governments, with military authorities, with international bodies, with organisations –with the expressions of modern power.

I shall abstain from analysing on the reporting outside 'the hemisphere of Western media' – although it is important part of the problem given the fact, that reporters in semi- or non-democratic countries suffer from intolerable and

dangerous pressure, be it from government forces, militant groups, clans, tribes or non state-armies – horrors which I myself, coming from a relatively protected society, will never have to deal with.

But it is a myth, when we in the western press look at ourselves as honest observers, doing our job on behalf of a public, hungry for knowledge, a public, who wants to watch, listen or read news, based on objectivity and the humble search for the truth. At least that's the mirror, we prefer.

But sadly we are no longer just a neutral force of information. Today we are mainly traders in a market, competing for the most dramatic story, which we deliver in the manner of stand-up comedians, feeding television-audiences with sound bites. The reporter is getting more important than the reporting itself. The Media person is the message.

For instance: We work willingly as 'embedded' and 'attached to pools' on conditions, set by governments or military authorities, and thus we become – in the eyes of 'the other side', whoever the other side happen to be – a part of the conflict covered – willingly or unwillingly.

Picture my British colleague, John Simpson of the BBC, whom I by the way respect, marching towards Kabul in 2001 in his armoured gear, speaking to the camera about his position being more or less ahead of the frontline.

Any non western viewer, any Muslim, any afghan, not to mention any Taliban-fighter, watching that particular piece of broadcasted globally, did not see a journalist, what I guess they saw was a happy western gentleman and conqueror.

Indeed, it's a mess.

IN ORDER to change this situation – this 'us and them'-obstacle for honest reporting – we, the western reporters and media, need to go back to basics. This may sound naïve and out of touch, but on the other hand: Too much reporting is out of touch with reality. And I believe, that we have to return to an ethical code, which to a certain extent is left behind in modern journalism. We must realize, that the media today is not only media, but also a great power, often manipulated by governments, but also in a certain way above governments.

We have to re-establish an old fashioned ethical dimension, which seems to have been lost along the road. I say this deliberately in this particular country, which is known for its relatively freedom of expression, but also sadly known for the fact, that writers, intellectuals and journalist pay a price for their freedom, in some cases the ultimate capital prize. These victims families might lecture me about my call for 'an ethical dimension'. After all this particular code in the end made some of them widows and orphans.

But so be it. We have to try to obey this code, no matter what – especially in a world, where spin, manipulation and oppression of the media is more common than ever..

We are, where ever we like it or not, no longer journalists, but foreign intruders in the eyes of this people 'on the other side'. Even reporters, who are known to 'the other side' as sympathetic and fair, like our colleague Alan Johnston of the

BBC, who was held hostage in Gaza for months, are not safe from the horrors of modern warfare. Johnston was probably an innocent victim of internal struggle among the factions in Palestine, but most of all his abduction exposed 'the other sides' overall view on the western media.

We've become targets – Lasse Jensen, my friend and colleague, now the media-watchdog of Danish Broadcast Corporation and seasoned former war-correspondent, told me about the hostage-market in Bagdad, where the stock of kidnapped journalists are valued on a daily basis – how much are the Italians, the Germans and the Dutch worth today? What are their organisations prepared to pay for their reporter? What can a US-news organisation cough up with for the release of their correspondent?

The security of translators, drivers and fixers, the people we are working with and on whom we are dependent, is seldom mentioned in this context, although they are running a far greater risk of having their head chopped off, as it happened recently when an Italian journalist was abducted in Afghanistan.

Now the debate about securing and protecting journalists on a more official level – a so called super-convention, uniting the different proposals from media organisations and international bodies, are debated, as is amendments to the 1977-protocols to the Geneva-convention of 1949.

The discussions and proposals are gathering steam and it is clear to see why: About one thousand journalist have been killed the last 10 years – the majority local people, doing their reporting on their home ground, but also conflicts such as in Iraq, parts of Africa and Afghanistan are craving a heavy toll.

But as I see it the essential question is: Are media workers entitled to some special protection? Should UN, press organisations, OSCE, EU or similar bodies demand an upgrading of The Geneva Convention, which stipulates that journalists captured in armed conflicts are entitled to the same protection as civilians? Should it be made a war crime or even a crime against humanity to kill or injure members of the media?

Maybe it should. I am not an expert on these matters, and I do agree with Harold Evans, the former editor of The Times, when he is blaming governments for ignoring any suggestions of sanctions on states, who close their eyes and tolerate impunity to the culprits killing journalists.

But my point here is: Any super-convention must be clear and visible detached from the reporters on the ground, from their employers and their organisations, national or international. There have to be a wall, tighter than the Israeli 'protection-barrier', between 'us' and 'them' – the politicians and official 'corporate powers'.

I believe we shall stick to our guns, so to speak, and insist on refusing to be part of any outside assistance, well meaning as it may be.

I have asked colleagues and friends in the media business what they think about this issue. They all reacted by a gut feeling, telling them to turn down any offer of official status, which is the consequence of any super convention.

Let me quote an experienced Danish photographer, Carsten Ingemann, who also happens to be president of the committee for the Danish equivalent the Pulitzer Prize, the Cavling Committee, who told me: "A journalist can only represent his

media and that's it. The very moment he is attached to any other level, he is losing his independence and thus his credibility.

Mr. Ingemann points to some sensible rules, reporters should subscribe to, and in many ways relate to the recommendations from INSI, for example to avoid looking like space-pilots in combat-gear, which creates an unnecessary distance to the people in the actual environment, who seldom are sporting helmets and heavy armoured flak jackets.

Again: I do indeed agree. As journalists we have to turn down any offer of protection, be it embedded, pooled, attached or institutional connected, simply because in the end of the day our independence is our only protection.

Thus I am very sceptical about the usefulness of any measure to further protect journalists – to quote another colleague, Steffen Jensen of TV 2 Denmark: Any 'official-stamping' will end up as another obstacle for the reporting-job.

- You are deliberately asking to be a target, he added, because nowadays you are mainly covering regional conflicts (along the 'liberal intervention'-lines, my addition), involving militias and private armies either fighting western interventionists or each other. In any case they see you as at best as a semi-diplomat, a person of political and military power, or they see you as an outright enemy. Any convention, created on western initiative and premises, will add to the enmity.

Let me conclude for now – in the first place reporters have to change the behaviour on the ground and try to signal really independence. We must deny any offers of 'em-beddement' or 'attachment to pools', if the price is our independence, we must avoid affiliation with international or governmental bodies, not to mention military, and we must remember, that our reports are available globally – and received as alleged conspiracies.

In other words: We'll have to stop sleeping with ethical enemy. Not because we want to be killed – knowing from the statistics that it is much safer to be 'embedded' than to act a loose cannons in the free lance field – but because we are out there in search for credible and trustworthy reporting.

Yes, it's naïve, it is even probably impossible in a global competing media world, but as an ethical guideline for the reporter on the ground it's fitting as useful, because it is the only protection, we can count on in the long run. In the end the only party, we can trust, is the public, we serve.

Thank you.

When I returned to Afghanistan in 1996 in order to cover the Taliban take over of Kabul, one afternoon I found myself on the frontline north of the city hearing the almost silent 'click' from a Taliban-soldier unlocking his Kalashnikov for opening fire. At that moment my Danish press card or the piece of paper, I had obtained from the new media office in Kabul, was not valid at all – what saved me from a probably harsh destiny was my Turkish cameraman, Kemal, who rapidly produced his passport from a pocket, showing the soldier its crescent on the cover.

The immediate change of attitude I shall never forget: From being one of 'them' I was suddenly –maybe not one of 'us', but certainly a guy on the true side of the believers.

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