

International Communication Gazette

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International Communication Gazette 2010 72: 9

DOI: 10.1177/1748048509350335

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BEYOND ORIENTALISM

Joris Luyendijk

Abstract / Factors beyond the control of journalists and media organizations are essential in the construction of news about the Middle East. Ideology plays a role and so do ignorance and prejudice, but even when as a correspondent one knows the local language and is hypersensitive to the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and orientalism, still the coverage one produces often reinforces stereotypes. The cause seems to lie in the dilemmas inherent in the collection and representation of information, in particular in non-western, non-democratic contexts. A solution may be to embrace rather than obscure these dilemmas but this requires a fundamental rethink of what news is, both on the part of journalists and of audiences.

Keywords / bias / dictatorships / frames / journalism / news values / transparency

Introduction

Why is news about the Middle East in the western media the way it is? Between 1998 and 2003 I worked as a Middle East correspondent. Based first in Cairo, then in Beirut and finally in East Jerusalem, I covered the area between Iraq and Morocco for Dutch radio, TV and print media. Earlier I had studied anthropology and Arabic, including a year of fieldwork among Egyptian students. I had read and internalized Edward Said and other post-essentialist thinkers and when I set out for Cairo I was determined not to produce the sort of colonial representation that Said and others had identified. I am not saying that Edward Said is 'right'. What I am saying is that I was convinced by his arguments. As a result I tried to apply them to my work, but when afterwards I went over those five years of hard work I had to conclude that I had failed almost completely. In spite of all good intentions, my coverage was roughly identical to that in the rest of the western mainstream media. How come?

In what follows I try to argue that while ideology and ignorance on the part of correspondents and their desks back home are important, other factors seem at least equally important in determining the selection and framing of news. These other factors have less to do with ideology and everything to do with the dilemmas inherent in the collection and representation of information. However these dilemmas play out differently in non-democratic, non-western societies, both in the coverage of those societies and in the coverage of conflicts between those societies and western democracies. I conclude with five possible avenues for change, all of which

derive from the need to embrace, explicitate and highlight the dilemmas inherent in representation – rather than to obscure them. This requires a fundamental rethink of what news and current affairs are, both on the part of journalists and of audiences.

I am not an academic researcher nor do I claim to be one. I am a reporter with a social science training who hopes that the observations he made during his field-work as a Middle East correspondent may be of use to those who approach the dynamics of representation from a more theoretical angle.

Beyond Ignorance, Bias and Ideology

That much media critique focuses on ideology and skills is no surprise. I found truly amazing how ill-prepared many western correspondents arrive in the region. Even flagships like *The New York Times* or CNN often send people to Arab countries who do not know Arabic well enough to speak to someone without an interpreter. Most of them lead a lifestyle that puts them in the top 5 percent bracket of the socio-economic spectrum of the society they live in, and particularly the big shots seem to lead a very pampered life, surrounded by assistants and far removed from the sort of everyday life the rest of the country lives. Correspondents' ideological outlooks are difficult to pinpoint but it was disheartening to discover the ease with which almost all of them employ an asymmetrical vocabulary. An Israeli Jew who claims the land is given to him by God is an 'ultra-nationalist' whereas a Muslim who does the same is a 'fundamentalist'. An Arab dictator who chooses a political course different from the West is 'anti-western', a label that is never used the other way around. Have you ever seen a US leader described as 'staunchly anti-Arab'? An Israeli politician who believes that only violent action can make his people safe is called a hawk. Ever spotted a Palestinian hawk? They are extremists or terrorists. Israeli politicians who say they believe in talks are doves. Palestinians with an equivalent political outlook are called 'moderate', implying that deep inside every Palestinian there is a violent core but, Allah be praised, this one has moderated that core. While Hamas 'hates' Israel, no Israeli party or leader ever hates Palestinians, even if those leaders use their parliamentary positions to call for the expulsion of Palestinians.

Ignorance, bias and ideology seem important and they merit the attention they receive from communication scientists. Yet there is more, and in what follows I propose to examine the factors shaping the news that lie *beyond* the control of correspondents and their media organizations. Some of these factors are universal, others specific to the Arab world. All of them involve dilemmas, choices between several evils rather than between 'good reporting' and 'bad reporting'. The reporter in me will also include examples, to liven things up a bit and move more easily from the abstract to the concrete.

The Problem with News

It was the autumn of 2000 when my newspaper asked me to go cover the Palestinian Intifada. I had been a correspondent to the Arab world for two years but the Israeli–Palestinian conflict seemed of a different, much more frightening order. Before

taking off from my home in Beirut that morning I turned on CNN and saw the sort of footage everyone associates with the conflict: stone throwing boys, Israeli soldiers taking aim, ambulances rushing off, angry Palestinians shouting slogans, and then a well-groomed reporter saying something like 'hopes for peace seem more distant than ever'.

There are no direct flights from Lebanon to Israel and I had to fly to Jordan and then take a taxi to Ramallah. In all this is an eight-hour trip, enough time to work up some existential anxieties. So there I was, finally, in Ramallah, only to find a city like any other. Children with rucksacks on their backs walked home from school, taxis made their rounds and in the market tomatoes were on sale. People, I asked a pedestrian almost angrily, where are the stone throwers? The man nodded kindly and said: 'Very easy. You follow this street all the way to the crossing, turn left and then straight on till the City Inn Hotel. There you will find the stone throwers.' He paused for a second and added: 'After two p.m.' And indeed, when the next day I went to City Inn Hotel, around two o'clock both Israeli army vehicles and Palestinian school boys showed up. Soon the stone throwing started, producing exactly the sort of images I had seen on CNN that morning.

News is by definition the exception to the rule. The quiet in the rest of Ramallah did not make the news, because it obviously wasn't news. Yet the effect of this filter or omission was that the whole city, if not the whole region, seemed on fire. It patently wasn't. So had I been frightened for no good reason, then, those eight hours en route from Beirut to Ramallah? Actually I had been in danger, not because of political violence but because of traffic. That is the big killer all over the Middle East, to the point that in any given year in Israel the odds of dying *on your way to* a terrorist attack have been bigger than *in* one. But again, road deaths are not news.

News is the exception to the rule. And with news from the Middle East this produces the first dilemma: what happens when you present exception after exception to an audience that has no picture of what 'the rule' in Middle Eastern societies may be? One may blame the constant media stream of negative images and stories from the Middle East on ideology. One would be foolish to deny this plays a role. Yet one should not overlook that 'negative images and stories' are characteristic of all news. Besides ideology, part of the problem lies in the nature of news, which presupposes that its audience is familiar with its contrast, i.e. everyday life.

This is a universal problem with news but in the Arab world one is confronted with an additional difficulty. These are all police states. The level and nature of oppression differs from country to country but all of them share the absence of the rule of law and that is an absolute difference with democracy. The best example of the difference between a democratic system, imperfect though it may be, and a non-democratic one, is this article. I express my ideas here without fear, it was published by the editor without fear and you read it without fear. In a police state this is unthinkable.

The absence of the rule of law has a profound impact on the availability and existence of information, on the nature of that information itself and on the possibilities of conveying that information properly to a western audience that has no first-hand experience of a non-democratic system.

Journalism in Non-Democratic Countries: Dilemmas

After five years on the job, my impression is that the codes, methods and conventions of journalism belong to the democratic societies they grew out of. Quality journalism's unique selling point is its promise of reliability. All the News that's Fit to Print, meaning, all the news we could verify. Hence the demands of check and double check, quoting by name and the hearing of both sides. For democratic societies these methods, imperfect though they may work in practice, make sense. These societies are organized around accountability and transparency, people are citizens rather than subjects who are usually not afraid to express their opinion and give their names; state institutions can be forced to publish information; civilians can organize in civil society; and civil society is monitored as well facilitated by media, the popularity of which is constantly measured and made public. None of this may run perfectly or even well in contemporary democracies, but there is a more or less *open* or at least *porous* process that journalists both contribute to and take their cues from. The very fact that social criticism of this process, even its denunciation as a sham, is possible at all is evidence of the confidence critics have that their rights will be respected. There was no Noam Chomsky in Saddam's Iraq, as there is no Peace Now in Syria.

Police states like Syria and Saddam's Iraq survive by oppression but equally by virtue of their non-transparency and unaccountability; in other words, a police state where verifiable information can be obtained and authorities can be held accountable by investigative reporters and civil society, where citizens use the freedoms of association and expression to gain as many followers as possible, such a police state ceases to be one because it will be overthrown by people using those freedoms.

As anyone who has lived in the Arab world knows, corruption and fear appear a major if not *the* factor determining people's lives and behaviour. Yet the terror inherent in a dictatorship is very difficult to convey to western audiences within the classic journalistic genres of All the News that's Fit to Print. People are afraid to talk, there are no verifiable data about waste, mismanagement and corruption to quote or public facts and statistics to check. Any credible mass movement against corruption would be violently suppressed.

If you apply the demands of check and double check, stories about corruption die, or are relegated to the 'background section', where they lose much of their urgency and power. Consequently corruption and fear are hardly problematized in western media, which makes the appeal of those groups promising an end to fear and corruption, the Religious Trend or 'Islamists' very difficult to explain. Even worse, since dictatorship is a closed system journalists, or researchers for that matter, cannot even know beyond anecdotal evidence just how important corruption really is to people in the country they report on.

An equally urgent example of an unproblematized issue is the vast and almost entirely un-discussed western support for Arab dictatorships: almost impossible to put on the agenda within the existing framework of western journalism because all those rallying against it are in hiding, jail or exile.

It is often said that Israel and the US governments win the media war. One could argue that the true winners are the Arab dictators of Egypt, Jordan and the

Gulf, who have succeeded over the past decades to hide their true faces from western audiences and opinion makers. This is at least my explanation why seven years after the attacks of 9/11 there still has been no meaningful debate on the pros and cons of the vast western support for the Pinochets of the Arab world. More so, western politicians as well as intellectuals from left and right continue to claim almost unopposed that western culture stands for freedom, whereas it is western political, military, diplomatic and economic support that helps many Arab dictators survive. In the Arab world western governments play the role of the US in Chile under Pinochet. But since the Arab Pinochets destroy or profoundly delegitimize all parties who may put that western support on the agenda, the issue becomes a non-issue.

That the almost ubiquitous silence about the West's complicity in the unfreedom of the Arabs may not be attributable only to ideology, becomes clear from an example from the run-up to the Iraq War. I was in Kuwait back then, talking to self-professed liberals. The idea was that if in the Arab world there were supporters to be found for the Iraq invasion, it had to be among pro-democratic, secular intellectuals in the country that had been destroyed by Iraq only 12 years before. Yet every liberal I spoke to was against the war. The reason: they did not believe that the US was genuinely intending to bring democracy. If Kuwait had been a functioning democracy these liberals would have made their point in public, organized demonstrations, written op-eds and gone on talk shows. And then the support they would have gathered among other Kuwaitis would have been a fair measure of the extent to which their views were shared.

But Kuwait was not a functioning democracy. The liberals spoke off the record, they held no demonstrations, nor could they poll the population. I could speak to 10 of them, even 20 if I stayed on another week, but there was no way of knowing how widespread their ideas were. Since I had no data or events to extrapolate the liberals' views to the wider population and since I could not even quote them by name, the article about them appeared somewhere in the 'background section'. This is what happens when you project journalistic methods on a society that is organized fundamentally differently from the society where those journalistic methods were developed.

The example of the Kuwaiti liberals points to the second set of dilemmas: those dealing with conflicts between non-democratic, non-western societies and democratic western ones.

Again some of the dilemmas are universal, others specific to the region. Universal is what every social scientist knows but what every mainstream media marketing department denies: there is no such thing as objectivity.

The struggles between Israel and the Palestinians, or between Al Qaida and the US, or between the factions in Lebanon all involve the clash of competing narratives. When representing that clash, media can never do justice to all these narratives. Worse still, it cannot even be neutral about more than one. Let me give an example about the piece I tried to do in the year 2000 about the traumas of the civil war in Lebanon.

While doing interviews I met a Druze lady who had tried to organize a seminar on the civil war. The idea was to invite representatives from all segments of Lebanese

society to discuss openings for reconciliation, perhaps even the establishment of a Truth Commission South African style. The Druze lady began inviting prominent Lebanese as co-organizers and immediately a huge row ensued. What to call the conference? Some wanted the 'Civil War' but many others objected. They said it had been a war principally fought by outside powers – Kurdish factions fighting alongside Palestinians, invading armies from Israel and Syria, Iran arming Hizbullah, Israel arming the Maronite Christians, Saudi Arabia arming some Palestinians and Syria arming others. This had been a 'war for Lebanon', not a civil war. But the 'War for Lebanon' was not an option for the title either, if only because the Arab nationalists objected to the term 'Lebanon'. They viewed Lebanon as a colonial construct carved out of Syria. In their view events in Lebanon had been part of a larger struggle to reunite the Arab world. Perhaps they should call it not the 'Civil War' or the 'War for Lebanon', but the 'War in Lebanon'? No way, said those co-organizers who saw the conflict through the prism of the Arab–Israeli conflict; if it hadn't been for the Palestinian refugees there would never have been a war. They wanted something like the 'Lebanese Chapter in the Israeli–Arab Conflict'.

The fact was that organizers could not agree on a term for the civil war, because there was no neutral term with which to describe the situation, except for *al ahdath*, Arabic for 'the events'. Indeed, when Al Jazeera produced a 16-part documentary series about *al ahdath*, they called it *harb lubnan*, translated into English as the 'War of Lebanon'.

Frames

To academics what was going on here is, of course, the stuff of communication science basics. To represent and explain a conflict to outsiders means choosing which terms and frames you adopt. Yet each term belongs to the narrative of one of the parties to the conflict. And whose terms you use, whose perspective you give. Sure, once you decided that Lebanon had seen a civil war, *then within that paradigm*, you can make a reasonably neutral report. But the very choice for one term and perspective and not another can never be neutral. Other examples: should we put the term 'peace process' between brackets? Because supporters of Hamas and Likud never believed there was such a thing in the first place.

Already the second sentence of this article demonstrates the point. Should I have said that I was based in East Jerusalem, in occupied East Jerusalem, in the eastern part of the sole, undivided capital of Israel? Is it occupied territory or disputed, and is it to be given up or given back? One way out is to adopt the vocabulary of the United Nations. Unfortunately, some parties to the conflict do not recognize the UN.

If the representation of a conflict is inherently biased – in the sense of there being no default position that is unbiased – in the Middle East (not a neutral term either) two specific additional dynamics are at play. First there is television, a medium in which some concepts can be easily visualized and others not. During the first Intifada, spokespersons for the Palestinian Authority (PA) fought out a blame game with their counterparts from the Israeli government. Israel claimed the problem was

terrorism, the PA said it was occupation. Now the Israeli claim was very easy to put into visuals: a picture of a burnt-out bus is understood by every viewer. Contrast this to Palestinians who tried to visualize the occupation. Every year many more Palestinian than Israeli civilians died in violence. Yet those instances where Israelis died attracted vastly more attention. One reason was an ideological affinity between western journalists and Israel. But another reason was that terrorist attacks produce spectacular images that every viewer and editor at the desk back home immediately understands, while Palestinians mostly died away from the cameras, in unspectacular and ambiguous ways.

Other structural factors play a role too. Most western correspondents have families and live in Israel. From a human perspective this makes sense, if only because there the schools are much better, safer and more stable. However the consequence was that correspondents tended to see the threat of terror as their problem, but the threat of the occupation as a Palestinian problem.

And then there were the media machines. Obviously a media war is a conflict where TV and radio broadcasts and newspaper pages are not only a window on the conflict. They are also a stage on which that conflict is enacted and fought out. Parties understand this and exert great effort to manipulate what happens on that stage. As one Israeli communications director said: 'What matters is not what happened. What matters is how CNN frames it.'

Here again a set of dilemmas colours coverage, with no easy exits in sight. All parties try to manipulate, but some succeed much better than others. Israeli and American governments have vastly more means at their disposal. Their politicians and spokespersons are used to the dynamics of democratic debate, having won the elections in their own party and country. Each audience has its own cultural reference points, and when Israeli spokespersons refer to the Holocaust this is much more powerful than when Palestinian spokespersons refer to the colonial era – an Arab trauma. 'The blood of victims is our voice in the world', Ayatollah Khomeini once said. That is sadly true but some blood speaks louder than other blood. When an Israeli family mourns the violent death of a loved one, they grieve in ways that an average western viewer can identify with. Contrast this to the funerals in Gaza where people carrying the corpse are expected to move at a fast pace to the grave, not at a slow death march, and people jostle with each other for the honour of carrying the corpse. It is in other words not a stately, choreographed exercise. And often some mourners shout slogans promising to drive the Jews into the sea. Such vengeful statements are made too on the Jewish Israeli side but usually not when cameras are around.

What is one to do as a correspondent in light of these dilemmas? Show the footage of the Gaza funeral and then go on to claim that, actually, these people are in deep mourning? Every psychiatrist and aid worker in Gaza will tell you they are in deep mourning, at least some of them. Should a correspondent 'decode' these images? We could, but let us not pretend that such a decoding is 'objective', or 'true'. Have we spoken to all those mourners? Again a choice between bad and worse, with ideology taking a backseat to the simple fact that some parties to the conflict benefit from their cultural proximity to the audience, as well as from superior PR

means which are impossible to compensate within existing codes and methods of journalism.

Back when I covered the Palestinians there was another related factor beyond correspondents' control, that was the PR machine of Yasser Arafat. The trouble was that not only did the PA lack the means for an effective PR campaign, they appeared to lack the will too. A dictator who defends his record looks weak and vulnerable, because by definition absolute power does not seek legitimacy. A fine example came after the failed peace talks of Camp David in 1999. Immediately after the collapse Prime Minister Barak gave a fine PR performance laying the blame entirely at the Palestinians' door. Arafat did not even give a press conference, even though his aides had prepared, with EU help, an elaborate media strategy.

Dictators are not against PR but for them PR is less important than for democratically elected leaders. Whenever a competent Palestinian spokesperson arrived at the scene, he or she was replaced by a less competent one. According to the officials and observers I spoke to this was deliberate. Yasser Arafat felt threatened by successful spokespersons, who could turn their verbal guns on him. The best-known victim of this was the eloquent Palestinian academic Hanan Ashrawi.

In the run-up to the Iraq War something similar seemed to occur with the Iraqi minister of information, Al Sahhaf.

A Bleak Picture

Summarizing the observations so far, one must conclude that news is inevitably filtered – that it presents the exception to a possibly unknown rule and leaves out all that is unverifiable. It is distorted in the sense that it portrays non-democracies through the same journalistic prism as democracies, with terms like 'president', 'parliament', 'professor' – even though these terms refer to something entirely different in a non-democratic context. Then news is manipulated in the sense that parties realize the importance of their media performance and successfully try to influence journalists. News is unequal or partial because some parties manipulate more effectively than others. At the same time news is inevitably biased because a single day in the Middle East can yield 10 different narratives, with different terminology, different parties to hear about different frames and with the victims in one narrative in the role of perpetrators in another. Finally news is necessarily simplified because time and space are never unlimited.

All in all a pretty bleak picture, in particular because this is not the result of correspondents failing, or violating their own methods and promises. I could have filled this article with stories of colleagues who violated the codes and conventions of their profession. Who faked date-lines, or paid Lebanese to fire into Israeli territory so they had an exclusive 'border incident', or who inserted gunfire into their radio reports, or who didn't know an Iranian from an Arab or an Arab Christian from an Arab Muslim. Yes, these things happen, but I think we can and must go one level deeper and examine what happens when journalists *do* honour all their codes and methods. In other words, we must focus not on what could be done better, but on what could *not* be done better. Blaming 'the media' for the coverage it

produces is actually a cop-out, it is what one could term an intellectual If Only Escape-Phantasy. If Only the media would be objective, If Only journalists would work harder, Then . . .

Then what? Then we would still have filtered, distorted, manipulated, biased and simplified coverage. Let me go back to that example of the boys throwing stones in Ramallah. Should I have done a report 'Ramallah mostly calm except for one little spot after 2 p.m.?' Who would be interested in that? And why not a piece too on 'Bogota calm today', and 'Rotterdam calm today'? News is what's new or what's different.

Should I have done a background report on why these boys threw stones? The trouble is, there are easily nine contending interpretations of the stone throwing. So which parties' views do I exclude? In what order do I present them, what terminology do I adopt? Are these Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims, terrorists, Arab newcomers, Goyim? And these soldiers, are they Zionist occupiers or members of the Israeli Defence Force?

We forget for a moment the Eurocentric, lazy, ignorant or just plain stupid rotten apples in the media basket. Then: given the budgets, given the background knowledge and the attention span of the average audience, given the time pressure inherent in news, given the disparity in PR means between different actors in the field, given the nature of dictatorships, given the available genres in journalism, given limitations imposed by language and narrative, and given the internal dynamics of large bureaucracies like news organizations, *the coverage that we get is the logical outcome of the limitations inherent in the production of news as news is conceived of at the moment . . .*

How to Improve Journalism? Five Possible Solutions

This is why we can and should go one level deeper in media critique, in particular when we want to improve reporting. Because none of the aforementioned mechanisms is going to go away by itself. Hence the only opening for change seems to be to go for a radical rethink, to change how news is conceived. We could devise new journalistic genres to compensate the limitations inherent in the collection and representation of information.

I have come up with five. First we need the audience to realize it is watching the news, i.e. it is watching the exception, not the rule. Take as an example Islam. News is what is not normal, so ever since the attacks of September 11th media have bombarded us with stories about Muslims who do not behave normally: the 0.00001 percent who bomb cars and burn flags and shout scary slogans.

We need more non-fiction articles and books on the other 99.99999 percent of Muslims who do not and cannot make the news. This is where social scientists with their experiences in fieldwork could play a major role. Isn't it sad, if you think about it, that the concept of a contextual non-essentialist approach to Islam has made virtually no inroads in public opinion, while among social scientists a non-essentialist approach has become totally obvious?

Second, we need to recognize that journalism is not a one-methodology-fits-all-systems. Police states are fundamentally different from an open system like

democracy. In a non-democratic system 'public opinion' refers to something fundamentally different than in democratic societies. Unless reporters find genres and concepts to elucidate this, coverage will continue to treat police states and democracies as essentially similar societies – distorting what may be the most important thing about the Arab world right now: people there are not free. And for this western policy is at least partly to blame.

We need new genres that elucidate in a powerful and urgent way what remains hidden in a police state, i.e. that it is a police state and what the absence of rule of law means.

At the same time, the general public must be made familiar with what could be called *structural ambiguity*, that is, ambiguity that cannot be overcome by extra efforts in reporting because it is inherent in the system. The fact that the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the fall of Communism and the first Intifada took most observers and analysts by almost total surprise cannot be explained away by incompetence on the part of those analysts and reporters. Dictatorships and societies under occupation are intrinsically non-transparent, and in the current post-9/11 climate this is a very important point to make. Otherwise western audiences are likely to fill in the blanks, thinking: if I see hundreds of angry beards burning Danish flags, this must be representative of Egyptian public opinion. Perhaps it is. Perhaps it isn't. We cannot know and this ambiguity should find a place in coverage.

Think of the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. The White House was predicting that the Iraqi people would welcome American troops as liberators, throwing rice and flowers. Rather than giving one minute to the White House and then one minute to those claiming the contrary, reporters might have juxtaposed the White House claims not with counterclaims but by scepticism: what are your predictions based on? This would have revealed very clearly to what extent the US administration was acting on faith rather than evidence, prompting the real question: what, if any, are your scenarios in case your faith proves unfounded?

Third, in conflicts media organizations should find ways to increase transparency about their choices and criteria for selection. Rather than hiding behind promises of objectivity, it makes much more sense to embrace their subjectivity. 'The past year we from the BBC ran 19 stories about Israeli human rights violations against Palestinians and three stories about Russian human rights violations in Chechnya, even though in Chechnya twelve times as many civilians died. This is because . . .' One may think of a section on the website: 'The New York Times says "disputed territories" which "Israel" "won" in the "1967 war" and which "Israel" might "give up" in "negotiations".' And then hyperlinks to all the terms between double quotes. Perhaps the foreign news editor might write a daily or weekly column, sharing with the readers the criteria for her or his choice of subjects, angles and terms. Of course an embrace of subjectivity implies a fundamental rethink of the media's role. Just like Edward Said's work meant a fundamental rethink for anthropologists. This will take time, yet would open fantastic new opportunities for representation.

Fourth, there is the need for the media to situate themselves in the field they operate in. To come back to the example of the boys throwing stones in Ramallah.

Was the footage of stone throwers fake? I would say it was not. Yet it wasn't authentic either. When Al Qaida stages an attack its power derives primarily from the media attention it grabs: where does reality stop and representation begin?

We need new conceptual tools to analyse, and we need new journalistic tools to represent the interplay between image and reality, between coverage and its influence on the very world it covers. Such a contextualization of the media would have to include an honest appraisal of its internal dynamics too. There is competition between journalists, as there is competition between academics. And as academics are encouraged to present their findings as spectacularly as they can within the codes and conventions of their profession, so are journalists and reporters. One of the grossest distortions these days is talk about 'the media'. In reality 'the media' are complex bureaucratic structures, internally divided, prone to infighting, stuffed with hard-working and ambitious professionals who want to further their individual careers. All this influences their end-product: news. Rather than decrying these all too human impulses we had better accept them and analyse how individual and collective incentives influence reporting.

I think for a moment of a book by anthropologist Leila Abu Lughod in which she explained the conditions under which she started her fieldwork with a Bedouin clan in Egypt. How her father introduced her to the family, and the clan traded jokes about the outrageous stories they had fed other anthropologists. Such a little insight in the context of Lughod's work seemed to teach me as least as much about that clan as all the following stuff about patrilinear parentage.

Fifth. This is perhaps the most important challenge, and the most urgent. Earlier I used the example of the Lebanese civil war, and how representation requires one to adopt the framework or paradigm of one of the parties. Parties to a conflict inevitably objectify their opponents, whose motives go unheard, whose fears are ignored and whose perspective goes unexamined. This objectifying then paves the way for violence, the way an average Hollywood narrative prepares the viewer for violence by the good guy against the faceless and dehumanized bad guy.

How to transcend these frames? Think of what came to be called the cartoon crisis. In the Netherlands it was framed as: first they bombed New York, then London, then Madrid, then they killed Theo van Gogh and now they even get worked up about some cartoons; it is time to draw a line. Meanwhile on Al Jazeera and other Arab media the storyline seemed to go: first they bombed Afghanistan, then they destroyed Iraq and now they even trample on our prophet, we have to show them enough is enough.

How to incorporate these mutually exclusive narratives into one meta-narrative? Academics in the social sciences are dealing with the same dilemmas. Could journalism benefit from strategies devised by academics to deal with inevitable biases and ambiguities in their representational work? If academics do not have these solutions, should they not include that failure in their criticism of the media's failure to balance narratives? If academics on the other hand do have strategies or solutions, why don't they share them? Yes, journalists are wildly defensive; after my book I have been called a liar, a whiner, a populist, an anti-democrat and an anti-Semite, and that was only in *de Volkskrant*, say, the Dutch version of *The Guardian*.

Yet, a colleague of mine also hit a truth when she said: 'the problem with communication scientists is, they don't communicate'.

Epilogue

Two questions remain. First, is this the battle to pick now? Given the dismal state of much of the media, should we pull the rug from under the last few quality media standing? Destroying their myths of objectivity and *The News that's Fit to Print*. Should we not fight those instances where the stronger unambiguously imposes its terms on the weaker, rather than make complicated points about representation?

When I lived in East Jerusalem in 2002 we went through a wave of terrorist bombings. And after each of them the Israeli army would often set up roadblocks, sometimes right in front of my house. I could see from my own window how they kept Palestinians waiting for hours, while hardly checking the cars, or the trunks. Meanwhile Palestinians could pass unhindered by foot, and even unseen when they took the back road behind my house. More bizarre still, sometimes the roadblocks would be placed right after an intersection. Palestinians could wait for an hour, or they could turn left at the intersection, get stuck navigating the narrow backstreets, and come back on the main road one hour later, 200 metres after the Israeli roadblock, totally unchecked and in full view of the Israeli soldiers.

These were the 'security measures' that Israeli spokespersons referred to routinely, a term adopted wholesale by virtually the entire western media. Reporting can be that bad.

My second question is, would audiences be interested in these new genres? Can journalism afford to problematize its own truth-claim? Philosophy survived Nietzsche and anthropology survived Said. Yet for the media it is impossible to predict how audiences would react to honest, modest yet ultimately much more realistic forms of news. Given the stakes, and given the direction in which quality media are heading anyway, it seems worth a try.

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