Gillian Dooley interviews Joris Luyendijk, author of *Fit to Print: Misrepresenting the Middle East* (Scribe Publications, 2009).

When Joris Luyendijk was sent to Cairo as a foreign correspondent for the Volkskrant newspaper and Radio 1 News in the Netherlands, he had never worked as a journalist before. His background was in social sciences and Arabic. ‘Journalists know what’s going on in the world, I thought; the news gives an overview of these events, and it is possible to keep that overview objective. Very few of these ideas survived intact in the years that followed’ (11-12). In his afterword to *Fit to Print*, he lists five main problems with journalism in the Middle East. Firstly, there is the fact that news is by its very nature concerned with drama, and the day-to-day coverage of violent acts being committed by a small group of Muslims gives the impression that ‘Islam is inherently violent’ (237). The background information is available but hardly anyone reads it and it doesn’t have the impact of the daily news bulletin.

Secondly, journalism in a democratic country is one thing, but reporting in countries where dictators rule and there is no tradition of freedom of speech is a different matter: ‘a dictatorship in which journalism as we know it is possible would cease to be a dictatorship’ (238). Luyendijk doesn’t claim to have answers: ‘Once you accept that the classical fit-to-print methods of journalism are suited only to the sort of political system they grew out of – democracies – a space opens up for non-conventional reporting. What that space might look like, I wish I knew’ (239).

Thirdly, there is a feedback effect: ‘while news represents the world, this representation then influences that same world’ (239). PR firms and communications departments operate with impunity, because ‘the mainstream media continue to pretend they are not really there’ (239). Throughout the book, Luyendijk explains various aspects of the process of writing a news story in a foreign country – the local fixers who provide the people to interview, the provision of favourable images, the questionable practice of embedding – ‘If a reporter goes into a battle zone embedded with the army, this should not merely be pointed out – it should take centre stage’ (239). And what happens when the media lie or exaggerate? ‘When CNN tells a lie, the impact may be much bigger than when my silly little Dutch government does. Yet in the latter case it is considered news; in the former case, it ends up somewhere on the “media page”, at best’ (240).

Luyendijk’s fourth point is about rhetoric. ‘Readers and viewers need to be reminded that the only consensus is that there is no consensus. ... Have a foreign editor use words such as “separation barrier”, or “Apartheid wall”, or “fence”, or whatever other term is available for that concrete thing on the West Bank. I mean in Judea and Samaria. In the Palestinian territories. In the occupied – oh no, disputed – territories. Or is it “liberated”? ’ (240). And beyond vocabulary, the perspectives need to come from across cultural boundaries: ‘If we want to understand Al-Qaeda’s appeal, we need to see how it presents itself – not only how the Western foreign-policy establishment views it’ (240). And the narrative needs to be framed: ‘Why not experiment with a column ... in which the foreign editor writes a daily update about the criteria behind the day’s journalistic choices?’ (240).
And finally, there is the market. ‘Somehow in the history of our democracies, it has been decided that news should be treated as a product rather than as a good. ... It is very difficult to see how democracies can survive when the information on which voters base their ballot-box decisions reflects not what they need to hear, but what they like to hear’ (241).

Clearly there are many issues here which are of concern to those of us interested in what happens to language, ideas and information when it attempts to cross cultural and national boundaries. I sent Joris Luyendijk some questions by email.¹

GD: I was reminded, reading your book, of the old hippy line ‘what if they held a war and nobody came’. What if they held a war (or terrorist attack) and no journalists turned up? As you ask, ‘What would happen if the news stopped showing fear-inducing spectacles, in favour of mundane things that inspired hope and confidence?’ (188). Wouldn’t people stop watching the news? There are shows like that and they do quickly become very boring! There is a terrible vicious cycle between publicising violent acts and perpetuating them.

JL: It is a terrible and vicious cycle indeed. The released transcripts from contact between the terrorists who carried out the Mumbai attacks and their superiors in Pakistan show very clearly their elation at being on CNN. Clearly part of the success of their attack was the attention they got, from us viewers. In a sense these terrorists act out our worst fears, and are rewarded with our full attention, in the slipstream of which they hope to achieve their goals.

I don’t think we should stop covering terrorist outrages, but I think it would be very useful and sobering to point once in a while that we journalists are not flies on the wall during a terrorist attack. We are the intended audience, it is staged for us.

GD: You say in your afterword that you have now come up with the one-sentence summary: ‘this book is about factors that lie beyond the control of journalists, but that influence what those journalists cover, and how’ (237). I quite like your idea of prefacing everything with a disclaimer about the impossibility of really knowing the truth, though I’m not sure how that would work. The suggestion of a column about the criteria behind the day’s journalistic choices seems more feasible. Do you know of anyone that’s tried it?

JL: Not that I’m aware. I had secretly hoped it would be offered to me by a Dutch medium, by way of experiment. But no.

I agree that a preface that simply states ‘we are not sure’ will be become annoying and boring very soon. What I am thinking of is more along the lines of having the echo of that preface in the back of your head when a journalist composes her sentences. Stuff like ‘anger across the Islamic world persisting for a fourth day, like here on the streets of Damascus…’ And then footage of a few hundred beards...

Or when an American politician makes all sorts of noises about America wanting peace in the Middle-East: then do a clip of earlier promises by those presidents, followed by a crisp summary of what they went on to do, i.e. support dictators and rejectionist Israeli politicians.

¹ An edited version of this interview was published in the Adelaide Review in September 2009.
GD: In many contexts, as you say, news has become a product not a good. Does this work differently in non-commercial media like PBS or the BBC – or SBS and ABC in Australia?

JL: I think it does. I am struck by the different media landscapes in each country where my book appears. In the US, public television plays a very small role. By contrast in the Netherlands the public broadcaster’s eight o’clock news is one of the best watched programs in the country. Same in Germany and Belgium.

I quite like the idea of turning papers into public or endowment based institutions, like universities. That would mean papers no longer have to make this insane profit margins.

GD: Do the new technologies change the situation? Was the recent coverage after the Iranian elections influenced for the better by people’s access to informal communication technologies through mobile phones and the Internet, for example?

JL: Early days, I think. I was struck more than anything by the one-sidedness of Western reporting. Extremely few efforts to present the world from the perspective of the Iranian regime. Also, frighteningly little attempt to look at the CIA clandestine programs that are running in Iraq. Another thing: a term like ‘clandestine program’ – our enemies never run ‘clandestine’ programs.

New technologies… On the supply-side things are changing extremely rapidly. The monopolist position of the cameraman has been busted. The monopolist position of the TV channel ditto, now that everyone can start his own channel on Internet. As this supply of information explodes, credibility and reliability will be the main currency I expect.

GD: One of the most important things to remember about the news is that it only shows the extremes, as you say. When you think about it, this can give you a new perspective: when we were in New York a couple of years ago, I was struck by the fact that there was a lot of media attention given to the murder of a woman in her apartment. It made me think that New York must really be quite a safe place to live, despite its reputation. But we are so conditioned to the sight of violence in the Middle East that it seems as if it’s the normal state of affairs. In which case, why does it still make the news?

JL: One reason is sunk costs. Since there are already so many journalists and photographers and correspondents and wire people over there, supply encourages demand. Then it is a vital region, in religious terms, military, geo-strategic, economic. The question is, how do you tell stories that are relevant and interesting but do not depend on these half-staged episodes of violence? The fact remains that, for example, in terms of violent street crime, the Middle East is one of the safest places you can be, particularly in what is called the developing world.

Why does it still make the news? Another reason is coincidence. On Sunday the West has its weekend, so broadcasters have little political news. In Israel the weekend is Friday-Saturday, so on Sunday there is always something going on. Then by virtue of it being on the news, it takes on greater importance.

GD: When I watch TV news I’m often reminded of a Two Ronnies sketch from the 1970s or 80s where Ronnie Barker read the news to a succession of ridiculously literal images. It’s kind of sensitised me and makes me look at news

Interview with Joris Luyendijk. Gillian Dooley. 
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images with a critical eye. You talk about humour – the unexpected fact that Arabs make jokes – but what about the possibility of satirical news shows helping to educate people?

JL: I suppose the Daily Show by Jon Stewart is pioneering this. Fantastic sequences of Republicans against endlessly different backdrops saying the words ‘Islam’ and ‘terrorism’ and ‘Iraq’ and ‘9/11’… Very funny and you never watch those stump speeches the same way again. Or so one hopes.

I have only one problem with satire, and that is does not invite action or positive change. Often people who watch satirical show seem to feel that they have done their bit by watching. But now I am being a bit of a stern Northern European.

GD: How about media studies in schools? Do you think teaching children to view the media critically can help break down these obstacles to comprehension?

JL: Absolutely. You need two changes. Media need to become way more transparent, both about what they show and about what they don’t or can’t show. And people need to wake up to the fact that journalists are human beings, not omniscient and omnipotent information-Gods.

GD: Do we just have too much news? I sometimes toy with the idea of a news service that only reports what one really needs to know, rather than the exact amount of information which fits into a newspaper or a TV news bulletin every day. I suppose Internet might be able to deliver that better than the traditional outlets as well.

JL: Tempting. But I’d ask: who decides what I really need to know? Of course this is already happening, it couldn’t be any other way. Already 99.99% of all that’s happening in the world never makes the wire services, and then of that 0.01% that does make it, again 99% is left out for reasons of time and space. So this is relative, no matter how wide you cast your net.

What I would like is concise hints or even explanation WHY a particular medium believes a particular event is so important. There seems so much rote-reporting; just because CNN or BBC has decided something is news, suddenly we all have to fall in line and imitate their choice.

GD: It seems to be an excellent translation. How much input did you have into the translation process?

JL: Thank you, my translator [Michele Hutchison] is great. She is an Englishwoman living in Holland, a former publisher herself. I tried to go over the text but I soon discovered that I had very little to add.

GD: You’ve given up being a foreign correspondent. Are you still working as a journalist? What’s your next project?

JL: I am still a journalist yes. I am currently trying to devise new genres for journalism about the environment. The trouble with environment news is that it’s boring (summits), depressing (more bad news by this or that panel) or frustrating (what can I do?). It’s also one-sided because the next generation, whose earth we are destroying, has no say because they have not been born yet.

I am trying to set something different up on the net, this will begin running later this year and the investors have made me swear not to talk about it in public.