

## **The Weaponization of News Media in the Middle East**

*This is an edited version of a keynote speech given by Dutch journalist Joris Luyendijk at the  
Weaponization of the Media Conference, Amsterdam, February 2007.*

I am honoured, I am happy and I am slightly apprehensive to speak to you here about the Weaponization of the Media. I am honoured because gathered in this room are some of my finest Dutch colleagues, people with an intimidating portfolio and far greater experience than me.

I am happy to be allowed to speak here because we have here a meeting between journalists and social scientists. Driven on by deadlines, journalists often lack time and energy for reflection and self-analysis, while social scientists are just as often remarkably ignorant of what actually happens in the real world, for example in newsrooms. I was trained as a social scientist and now work as a journalist and in my experience journalists and social scientists have a lot to learn from one another.

Finally, speaking here makes me feel slightly apprehensive because I am compelled to problematize one of the premises of this conference. This premise, as I understand it, is that news media *can* be weaponized. In other words, you have neutral, objective, unweaponized

reporting, and then on the other hand biased, subjective, weaponized reporting. The question then becomes: how do we keep news media unweaponized?

Well, it is my conviction that journalists can never fully unweaponize themselves and never have. In conflicts there is no such thing as objective value-free reporting that serves none of the parties, be it directly or indirectly.

I agree with Lawrence Pintak when he writes that the news media have become weaponized in new and unprecedented ways.<sup>1</sup> His book lists distressing examples, some of which have been severely underreported, at least in the Dutch press. I also agree with this conference when it claims on its website: “Especially during times of conflict it is essential for the functioning of a democratic system that the audience can rely on trustworthy and reliable news coverage.”

Yes, to deserve its name news must be trustworthy and reliable in the sense that journalists must never report things they know to be untrue or they know to be manipulated. And yes, parties to the conflict abuse and use journalists and news media in increasingly violent ways.

All of that is patently true but the idea that, opposed to untrue and manipulated news, there could be such a thing as objective and unweaponized information is I think flawed, if not to say naive.

Weaponization takes many forms, sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle, from Al Qaida propaganda on Al Jazeera to the presentation of statements by the White House about

Saddam Hussein's supposed connection to 9/11 or his weapons of mass destruction. From the choice to give no coverage to, say, Darfur, Congo or North Korea, to the choice to cover a story on a daily basis. In the end every kind of representation and thus reporting involves a set of choices, and these choices inevitably empower some while disenfranchising others.

Let me elaborate on those choices by relating an experience I had when I lived in Lebanon.

It was the year 2000 and I wanted to write a piece about the traumas of the civil war. Because there was something funny about the civil war in Lebanon: no one talked about it and no one called it by that name. Lebanese called the civil war *al ahdath*, the events. I started doing interviews and in the process I met a Druze lady whose experiences have taught me a valuable lesson, not only about Lebanon and the civil war but also about objectivity, or rather the impossibility of giving an account of a conflict that serves no political party to that conflict.

The Druze lady had tried to organize a seminar on the civil war. The idea was to invite representatives from all segments of Lebanese society to discuss past events and openings for reconciliation, perhaps even the establishment of a Truth Commission South African style. So the Druze lady began inviting prominent Lebanese as co-organisers and immediately a huge row ensued. The first problem was the name of the conference. Some wanted to call it the 'Civil War' but many others objected. In their view 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 after World War One by France with the goal of establishing a Francophone and predominantly Christian foothold in the Middle-East. As the Arab nationalists saw it, the events in Lebanon had been part of a larger struggle to reunite the Arab world and should be viewed as such. Perhaps they should call it not the 'Civil War' or the 'War for Lebanon,' but the 'War in Lebanon'?

No way, said those co-organisers who viewed the entire 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. In their view the title for the seminar should read something like the 'Lebanese chapter in the Israeli-Arab conflict'.

And so on. The organisers 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 situation. 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'.

The atmosphere for the Druze lady and her co-organisers got even more tense when it became clear that the conference needed not only a name but also dates. When had *al ahdath* begun? Arab Nationalists wanted the narrative to begin with the creation of Lebanon, those whose who gave centre stage to the Arab-Israeli conflict wanted the year 1948 when Israel

was established, others insisted on the year 1975 when the Lebanese army disintegrated, others wanted the Israeli invasion of 1975 as a starting point, and so on.

Things reached boiling point when the prospective organisers had to decide when *al ahdath* ended. According to some, *al ahdath* ended with the Taif accords of 1990 but others argued that the war continued, since Israel still existed, or since Israel still occupied the Palestinians, or since there was still an enormous Syrian influence in Lebanon. Then co-organisers started to argue over whether the Syrians had ended the civil war with their presence or had continued it, and so on until in the end, the whole idea of a conference was abandoned.

That was the first dilemma of representation that the Druze lady taught me. In conflicts the essential terms are rarely neutral. To represent and explain a conflict to outsiders means choosing which terms you adopt, yet each term belongs to one of the parties to the conflict. And whichever terms you use is the perspective you give. In other words: in one's choice for an overarching perspective or meta-narrative one is inherently weaponized by the party or parties with that same perspective.

Sure, once you decided that Lebanon had seen a civil war, that this civil started in year X and ended in year Y, *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.

Take Israel in Palestine for another illustration. Back when I was a correspondent the 'story' was the peace process and its disintegration. So how to report about the peace process without being weaponized or enlisted by one group or the other? The trouble was, again, with

the concepts. Many parties in the conflict put the term 'peace process' between inverted commas, since they considered the whole thing a ploy by the enemy to achieve through negotiations what could not be achieved on the battlefield. Both Hamas and Likud contested the very existence of a peace process, Hamas branding it the 'so-called peace process' or the 'surrender process'—a pun on the Arabic word for peace, and Likud calling it the 'piece process', whereby Palestinians were destroying Israel piece by piece.

Once again one could not report objectively because the very concepts available to describe the situation were disputed, and depending on one's choice to treat the peace process as a genuine phenomenon or not, different parties to the conflict were empowered or disenfranchised.

There was yet another problem with the Druze lady's conference in Beirut, and with neutral 'unweaponized' reporting in general. Who to invite? Lebanon has 18 sects but some people considered themselves a communist or liberal, rather than member of a sect. Then these sects had their own political factions and internal opposition.

It sounds so delectably straightforward: reports are neutral when both sides to an argument are heard. But in conflicts there are almost invariably more parties than there is space to hear them.

Again the conflict in Israel and Palestine provides plenty of examples. Take the failure of the Camp David peace talks between the Israeli leader Ehud Barak and the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the summer of 2000. Who do journalists decide to hear after the collapse? There was Fatah, the Palestinian Authorities, the secular Palestinian opposition, the

Islamist Palestinian opposition, the Palestinian peace movement, the Israeli government, the Israeli opposition and the Israeli peace movement. And if we want to hear the Israeli opposition, do we mean Likud, or the Jewish settlers or the orthodox Shas party, or the extreme left?

Think of the suicide bombings in Israel. The thrust of news reports would change dramatically if instead of the usual fuming Israeli government spokesman and stumbling PA spokesman, we would hear the views of an Israeli and then a Palestinian peace activist.

Ours is an optimistic culture. Our leaders get away with promising progress, our films must have happy endings to be successful, and whenever someone identifies a problem he or she is expected to have a solution at hand as well. So what is my solution then, to the problem that objectivity is a figment of our intellectual imagination?

In my view the way forward for news organizations and journalists might consist of two steps.

First we must stop the chase for the Unicorn of Objectivity. One often hears journalists make comments along the lines of ‘we all know that objectivity does not exist but we will do everything in our power to obtain it.’

Such Mission Statements have always confounded me. Imagine an explorer saying to his financiers: ‘We all know the Unicorn does not exist but I am going to spend all my time and energy to reach it.’

You cannot search for something that does not exist. Yet this is what media organizations and their marketing departments claim to do. ‘We report you decide,’ says Fox News. ‘Bringing you the facts,’ promises CNN. ‘One opinion and the other,’ says Al Jazeera. And my own NRC Handelsblad has been advertising for years with the slogan ‘We separate fact from opinion.’

At the same time and to my surprise, while social scientists recognize that knowledge is never neutral, they do seem to expect from their media organizations objectivity and neutrality. To take this phrase from the conference paper: “Despite their purported neutrality, news organizations are not always innocent bystanders to conflict.”

We are *hardly ever* innocent bystanders to conflict. Merely with their presence journalists influence the parties they report on, so we are participants rather than bystanders. And our choice of what to report and how always serves certain power interests.

Russia has been slaughtering civilians in Chechnya for years and the decision of western media to all but ignore this means we are indirectly weaponized by Putin. When news media present the NATO ‘operation’ in Afghanistan as a ‘reconstruction mission’, this is political, and when we treat statements from the White House about, say, Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or about Saddam Hussein’s collaboration with Al Qaida or about Iran’s nuclear ambitions, when we treat these statement as more trustworthy, then we are weaponized by the White House. We are weaponized by the Israeli government when we give coverage to victims of suicide bombings, and weaponized by the PA when we highlight victims of the Israeli occupation. Weaponization may not take the form of the weaponization of Hizbullah's Al Manar but the net result is the same: we view and present a situation from



the perspective of one particular party to the conflict, which helps this party achieve its goals, be it the mobilisation against Israel or, in the case of White House statements, the mobilisation against Saddam Hussein.

And again, there is no neutral perspective, just like there was no neutral word for *al ahdath* in Lebanon. Do we say 'climate change' or 'greenhouse effect', 'genetic modification' or 'genetic manipulation', 'European integration' or 'European centralisation'? Do we say 'news media' or 'corporate media', 'public broadcasting' or 'state broadcasting'?

My very first assignment as a Middle-East correspondent took me to Sudan where famine caused hundreds of dead every day. I went to a refugee camp in the south, collected my harrowing quotes and returned to the capital Khartoum. The night before I was to fly back to Cairo I went to an ex-pat party where I chanced upon a diplomat. I could not help losing my temper. How could Western policy makers fail to have a policy towards these poor Sudanese, I fumed, whereas a hundred times as much political effort went into the situation in Palestine even though a hundred times more people died in Sudan than in Palestine? The diplomat looked at me and made a point I will never forget: why are there hardly any western journalists in Sudan? How can a Western politician initiate new policies when the issue of Sudan is virtually absent from the media? She continued: If you journalists would have given as much space to every dead Sudanese as you had given to every dead Palestinian, politicians would be lining up here to solve the crisis.

As I said, journalists are *rarely* innocent bystanders to conflict and rather than continue the chase for the Unicorn of Objectivity, I believe journalists should come out and be honest to their audiences.

Yes, journalists would tell our audiences, our reports are biased. Not because we want them to be, but because representation is by its nature biased. But, we would continue, dear reader, we can explain to you where the biases are, we can hint at alternative perspectives on any given situation and finally we can explain why we chose our perspective, angle and vocabulary over others.

I realize that such openness about the limitations of narrative and language would require journalists to fundamentally rethink their professional identity. This is going to hurt, but as the Calvinists and the Americans say, no pain no gain. And such openness would offer all sorts of new possibilities, for example my step two forward, a restructuring of the news pages.

One could think of a daily column in italics where the chief of the foreign newsroom explains why today's page opens with this topic or that, why a correspondent was sent to a certain country or location, from what possible angles the correspondent could have told the story, why he took the angle he took and not another, what was left out, for what reason, how the coverage of other media of that particular situation raised this question or that. In other words, journalists and editors in chief would take their daily discussions on the news floor to their audiences, share with them their dilemmas, deliberations and decisions.

Of course such daily briefings in the form of a column would be impossible on TV and radio. But every media-organization has a website with infinite possibilities, not only in terms of space but also in allowing texts an extra dimension. To give an example. When a loaded phrase like 'Israel must give back occupied territory' appears in the text, we may put the terms 'Israel', 'give back' and 'occupied territory' in blue, giving readers the chance to

double-click on them and read why this media organization uses the term 'Israel' rather than 'Zionist entity', why it says that Israel must 'give back' land rather than 'give it up' and why that land is 'occupied' rather than 'disputed'.

This is where I think the future of quality journalism lies. To no longer just pour out our stories over our audiences, but also to tell them why we tell these stories and not others, and why we tell them the way we do.

Do I believe this is going to happen anytime soon? No I don't, because I think most journalists are still too fond of the idea of themselves as flies on the wall, as if not innocent then at least ironic bystanders.

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<sup>1</sup> 2006: *America, Islam and the War of Ideas*