

E-Mail Interview mit Judit Neurink

A. Would you please give a brief curriculum vitae ?

I was born in 1957, did not go to university but went to England for a few years after high school. First as an au-pair, later working in hotels, finally on management positions. When I got back to Holland at the age of 21 I started in journalism. Everything I know (and teach, sometimes) I learned by doing it. I started working for the magazine of a broadcasting company (NCRV), then Teletekst started and I worked five years at the news desk. I hated it, but it was useful because I now know very well how to keep a story short. I left and went to work as a freelancer, specializing in reporting on migrants in Holland, later on refugees. I worked for different broadcasting companies, Vara, KRO, Avro, producing for news radio. I helped getting the broadcasting companies on one line to start a national news program on radio, the Radio 1 Journal, 3 times a day, and worked there on the foreign desk for five years, especially reporting on the Middle East and the North of Africa. All the while I was still writing stories (I feel very much a writing journalist, get impatient with radio work) for various Dutch papers and magazines, mostly about migrants, refugees or Middle East.

Since 4 years I work only for Trouw, reporting on the Middle East and North of Africa, mostly from behind my desk, but I travel to the region a few times a year. This year I was in Kuwait and Iraq, and will return to Iraq next month.

I was member of the board and vice-president of the Dutch Union of Journalists (NVJ) for some time. Founded an organisation for Refugee Journalists and Writers in Holland (On File, of which I am still the chairman), and an organisation to help non-Dutch journalists find a job in the mainstream Dutch Media (Mixed Media, which I am also still chairing). I am vice-president of the organisation for the Free Press on the Balkans, Press Now.

B. Where and in which period of time were you appointed as a journalist / photographer during the Iraq war? Were you embedded or not?

Iraq is part of my work, so it was natural I would report on it. No, I was not embedded. I went to Iraq just after the war, end of April. During the war I kept in contact with colleagues who were embedded, or waiting in Kuwait to go in.

*C. What does the term "embedded" mean to you personally?
How would you define it?*

To me embedded means having to work under the censorship of one of the parties in a war. I am not a war reporter, so I did not have to make the choice. But before the war I was mildly positive: at least reporting would be possible. From the last Gulf war we only saw the military images of smart bombs, and CNN's reporting from Baghdad. Now at least journalists would be able to do their job. But now, after the war I am mildly negative. Yes, we had the images, but it turned out we only saw what the battalion the reporter was embedded with, wanted us to see. One of my contacts even lost his Thuraya phone when he was doing something the army did not like: talk to Baath party members - very important for independent journalists to also see the other side, but the army would not let him report on it. Independent, not

embedded journalists in Iraq were not only not helped at all, but also seem to have been killed by coalition fire.

D. How was the moral atmosphere towards the Iraqis / the Allies in the country you reported from?

Nice question. Holland was divided, although officially the government (which was working in overtime, as it had fallen) was behind the Americans and British. Especially leftwing Holland was very much against, with some big demonstrations against the war, and the matter played a role in the formation of the new government. The socialists made some weird movements to be able to change their view from against the war to in favor of getting rid of Saddam Hussein. In the end this was to no avail: the christian-democrats looked for other partners and the government was formed without the socialists.

It also played a role in my personal life. I have quite a few Iraqi friends, both Kurd and Arab. They disagreed loudly about the war and told me to get rid of those friends they did not agree with. Also, my Moroccan husband, who is in parliament for a leftwing party, was very much against the war, whilst I was more moderate, and could see the positive side of it: Saddam being sent packing.

*E. Who put you in charge with your reporting in Iraq?
For which agency/newspaper/channel did you give your reports?*

My boss at the foreign desk. We thought beforehand how to report, with two freelancers in Iraq: one in the north, and a Norwegian journalist reporting also for us in Baghdad. They did the reports, I did the rest, until I went to Basra, Najaf and Baghdad myself in April. I then reported for Trouw, but also made a few stories for my friends at Al Ahram Weekly.

*F. Which medium did you use for your reporting?
Where could your reporting be seen/heard/read? (TV, radio, internet, newspapers)*

Trouw is a daily newspaper, 130.000 copies a day, with a daily updated internet site www.trouw.nl

G. Which steps did you take in order to get information which was important for you ?

Behind my desk I phoned almost daily with colleagues in Kuwait, and sms-ed regularly with one embedded colleague in Iraq. I used the press agencies (Reuters, AP, AFP-eng) and read Arab websites in English. Whilst in Iraq, after the war, I went with a colleague from Bahrain and tried to talk to as many different people as possible.

H. How important is characteristics of medial influence concerning the receptive

person / reporter?

I am trying to understand this question. I try to read different opinions, different reporting. I try to keep in mind Reuters and AP are embedded, so can only show part of the reality. And that tv-images are like looking through the other end of a telescope. I try to weigh and make my own conclusions, always trying to be neutral. Although I must admit I was happy to hear in Basra how happy people were Saddam was gone, and when I was asked what these demonstrations in the West were all about, were they in favor of Saddam? No, against the war, I said. The Iraqi just smiled and said: but without the war Saddam would never have fallen. They and I did not know then of course that Saddam would go on fighting.

*I. In your opinion, to which extent were you influenced in your reporting by others?
Did you have the impression to be able to report in a free way?*

I reported freely, yes. Within the boundaries of censorship of the coalition, which did not directly confront me, but had its result on the reporting of Reuters, AP etc. But by not only using them as a source, I could report on the bigger question. And as for my bosses, they never interfered in anything. Of course we discussed things, but I was never pressed.

J. To which extent were receptive persons influenced by your reporting in your opinion?

I do not know. People told me they liked my stories, especially when in the first days of war I reported that it was impossible to get any idea about the dead soldiers and civilians on the Iraqi side. But people have so many different media they can look at, my reporting must surely only be part of whatever helped them form their opinion.

*K. Could you choose the manner and place of your reporting freely?
Did anybody take you to certain locations from where you were supposed to report?*

I was completely free. Also to choose locations, although there of course you are dependent on Iraqi guides. But I traveled partly with an Amnesty mission, so was shown a great deal other journalists have not been able to see, I am sure.

*L. How do you understand the term manipulation in general?
Where do you see the difference between manipulation and influencing?*

Manipulation is trying to change someone's point of view by feeding information, strong information, sometimes wrong information. The line between manipulation and influencing is thin, but influencing could be less aggressive, more difficult to see, and therefore more dangerous.

M. Did you feel manipulated during your reporting?

Did you have the impression that some parts you were told or showed didn't correspond with the truth?

No, I did not feel manipulated at all. And no, I don't think any of my stories were biased.

N. To which extent do you think that recipients were manipulated by your reporting?

Same answer as on J.

O. Which steps did you personally take in order to avoid a manipulation of your pieces of news?

I tried to look at as many different sources and media as possible and tried to keep an open mind.

P. Which role does, in your opinion, play the influence of media?

Wow, surely you do not want me really to start on this, this is too big a question. But to keep it short. The Arab media are at the moment setting the Arabs up against what is happening in Iraq. Apart from Al Hayat, which is trying to get a discussion started, they have not admitted Saddams crimes, and shown their remorse for all those people who died and ended up in mass graves. The only thing they are reporting on, is the American occupation, which they want to end. They do not show the fact that Iraqi's are glad to have got rid of the regime, that the majority of shia (themselves the majority in Iraq) is keeping quiet and waiting for things to get better. They only show their terrible fate, without water and electricity in this hot summer. Hypocrite, because in Syria and Yemen, for instance, people are far too poor to buy airconditioning and they suffer through the hot summers too. Yes, these media are influencing.

As for Holland, I would like to take another subject. On the war, I think most media have tried to be neutral and informative, although I have seen a few stories every now and again which were openly in favor of the war. But the reporting by the Dutch media on migrants, has influenced a lot of white Dutch people against them. By reporting only about problems - of the few - and not showing the opinion of migrants on neutral subjects, xenophobia in Holland has risen - and Pim Fortuyn was able to win 26 seats in the former parliament. But I am sure this is not the subject you want me to write about, so I will leave it at this.