

lation and enable us to farm less intensively, with less pollution. In 2000 Van Montagu set up the Institute of Plant Biotechnology Outreach, an institution at Ghent University which aims to meet the needs of less-developed countries with training, technology transfer and scientific research into plant technology.

Genetically modified maize and soy are used “invisibly” in many products in the United States, but in Europe, even thirty years after their introduction, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) still meet with substantial resistance in some quarters. Van Montagu can become very worked up about this: an interview in the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* on 29th June 2013 carried the headline “Opposition to GM is a crime”. Looking back on the past thirty years Van Montagu believes he was too slow to stand up to what he considers a misleading and false impression of the issues as presented by his opponents. For example, he mentions the myth of suicides by small farmers in India, who were reportedly forced by Monsanto to work with their genetically modified seeds. “Completely false,” according to Van Montagu.

Van Montagu claims that GMOs enable farmers to achieve bigger harvests sustainably and at lower costs. Seeds in the lab developed and tested on experimental plots have higher nutritional value thanks to their genetic modification, or are more resilient when faced with drought, poor soil, disease, or pesticides. “We’re just getting started,” says Van Montagu. “Genetically modified crops are an effective weapon against hunger and good for the environment. Genetic change in crops is as old as the world. Since the invention of agriculture humans have been making genetic changes by crossbreeding plants. Current techniques for modifying plants are very precise methods for something that has been in vogue for thousands of years.”

DIRK VAN DELFT

Translated by Anna Asbury

A Cassandra in the City

Joris Luyendijk

The Dutch journalist Joris Luyendijk (° 1971) embodies the future of his profession in more ways than one. The fact that his name has become almost a brand in its own right illustrates the still embryonic but unmistakable emancipation of journalists with respect to their media. Through his work as a financial blogger for *The Guardian* in London, Luyendijk demonstrates that impersonal, engaged reporting need not stand in the way of objective quality.

Admittedly, not all his colleagues like Joris Luyendijk. And some of them have good reason. The US-dwelling Dutch columnist Charles Groenhuijsen, for example, was recently described by Luyendijk as “an idiot. And I don’t mean that tongue in cheek; he really is a criminally naive idiot.” The reason for this is that Groenhuijsen believes that NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden is a traitor, while Luyendijk considers him a hero.

Subjecting members of his own profession to (highly) critical scrutiny is something of a trademark of Joris Luyendijk. While many accuse him of soiling his own nest, his robust but always carefully argued media criticism always provokes thought and reflection. He is a qualified anthropologist, and that is evident in the way he looks at news and reporting. For example, he finds it difficult to reconcile himself with the notion that a correspondent – be it abroad, in a war zone, in the political or financial/economic sector – should actually become part of the exclusive biosphere about which he or she reports.

It was on precisely this topic that he wrote the booklet *People like us*¹, a critical review of his earlier spell as a Middle East correspondent for various Dutch media between 1998 and 2003. In the book he shatters the illusion that foreign correspondents are able to make sense of the world from their location. While they can occasionally put their own slant on a report, generally they simply carry out instructions given to them by the

editorial teams at home base. That explains why when browsing through newspapers and zapping between news programmes you will often keep on seeing the same images and the same stories. The way it works is this: the men and women in the editorial teams are of course smart, but they don't have an overview of the world; rather, they have an overview of the news agencies, from which the boss, or "chief" in the jargon, makes a selection.

The essay caused something of a furore. *People like us* became the subject of heated debate, was reprinted more than 20 times, and even drew a response in book form from other reporters seeking to restore their professional honour. It gave Luyendijk himself fame in his native Netherlands: in 2006 and 2007 he was invited to host the popular Dutch chat show programme *Zomergasten* (Summer Guests), and in 2008 hosted the winter version of the same programme, *Wintergasten* (Winter Guests).

In *Je hebt het niet van mij, maar...* (You didn't hear it from me, but..., 2010) he refined his media criticism. He spent a month as an undercover reporter in the Dutch Parliamentary world in the seat of the Dutch government in The Hague. His report provided a penetrating insight into the "media-political complex". It demonstrated with painful accuracy that the political world is not only a rarefied environment that is far removed from the normal world, but also that, apart from politicians, journalists and lobbyists also play an active and interconnected role within that network.

One result of this is that reporters take a rather short-sighted view of the tactical and personal aspects of politics, and invest less in independent research. To illustrate the point, Luyendijk wonders rhetorically what difference it would have made if the Dutch public had simply stopped following the political news completely since the last elections. "What would you really have missed?" he asks. "Lots of opinion polls, lots of debates in which the puppets attempted to outdo each other; analyses of those attempts; efforts to form a government; reports of what all those puppets

thought about it all?" It is an analysis that does not just apply to Dutch political reporting.

In 2012 he moved from the Dutch daily newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* to *The Guardian* in London to report from the financial centre that is the City. The appointment gave Luyendijk an opportunity to pursue his anthropological/journalistic approach in a logical, consistent manner. Press conferences, stock market prices and sales figures do not interest him. As a scientist, he interviews financial workers high and low about how the financial world is functioning after the crisis. The succession of interviews posted on his *Banking blog* present a picture of the sector that is both human and frightening. Human because many interviewees are very aware of the risks that are still being taken in the banking world; frightening because no one appears to have the power to stop the machine. Luyendijk has now finished his blog - a book is on the way - but the final picture that emerges is decidedly dark. It carries a great, Cassandra-like predictive power about the inevitability of a new systemic crisis in the near future.

Original, empathic, (self-)critical, and always with an open mind: Joris Luyendijk is the modern-day embodiment of engaged journalism. The fact that he has acquired some fame along the way merely confirms his status as the standard-bearer of New Journalism. As his own quality mark, the new journalist is less and less dependent on a medium in order to communicate with the public.

BART EECKHOUT

Translated by Julian Ross

This English translation by Michele Hutchison was published in 2009 by Soft Skull Press in New York. The original Dutch version (*Het zijn net mensen*) was published in 2006.