

Interview – Stijn Joye

Written by E-International Relations

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Stijn Joye is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Sciences of Ghent University (Belgium) where he teaches and conducts research in the field of international communication. His main areas of research and publications concern international news reporting with a focus on the representation of suffering and crises alongside issues of domestication, colonial heritage and the practices of seriality and artistic imitation in screen culture. In 2006, Joye was awarded the 'IAMCR Prize in Memory of Herbert I. Schiller' for his work on the alternative global news agency Inter Press Service. Together with the late Jan Loisen of Free University Brussels, he co-authored a Dutch and English handbook on the theoretical foundations of communication sciences. Joye is also an Associate Editor of *International Communication Gazette* and book review editor of *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*. He is also an active member of several international academic associations and was a lecturer at Erasmus University Rotterdam (the Netherlands) as well as a Visiting Fellow at LSE (UK) and at Sichuan University (China).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

When looking at the field of mediated distant suffering I believe this young strand of research has currently developed into a stage of consolidation accompanied by thematic expansion. Following two waves of research that laid the groundwork, the field is now welcoming and opening up for more diversity in research approaches, foci and actors. While the initial work has focused on the textual and normative dimension of the representation of distant suffering through, by and via the media, a second wave of research delved empirically into audience engagement. Up until today, scholars from different disciplines are continuously contributing to this body of knowledge, but now do so from new and refreshing angles.

Colleagues are currently putting the basic findings to the test in new contexts, rapidly expanding our knowledge of, for instance, how non-Western media report on distant suffering or how people from diaspora communities or authoritarian countries relate to the suffering 'other' represented by the media. This tendency of de-westernizing the field was very much needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of media, audience (dis)engagement, or discursive strategies of representation, in very different contexts with regard to the central notion of distant suffering. Concerning the latter, adjacent topics of research have grown in importance as well. Take for example the increasing interest in humanitarian communication by non-media actors such as political organisations, advocacy groups or NGOs. Of course, technological developments have spawned a plethora of new gateways for research. For one, think about ethical questions surrounding the ubiquity of graphic images of suffering in our digital age.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When I started off with my own PhD research under the guidance of one of the most brilliant people I know, Daniël Biltreyst, I was going through the vast literature on international news. Although very helpful in understanding the history, context and practices of foreign news reporting, it felt like something was lacking. It was not until I came across *The Spectatorship of Suffering* by Lilie Chouliaraki that my project took the right direction. Impressed by her seminal work and critical spirit, I decided to go deeper down the proverbial rabbit hole, both theoretically by reading

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into critical media studies, as well as methodologically with the exploration of Critical Discourse Analysis. This allowed me to think differently and understand the world in a significantly different way, urging me to be aware of and actively look for concealed power relations in seemingly objective news reporting in particular, and in media content in general. Later, I had the chance and honour to be an LSE visiting fellow under the supervision of Lilie Chouliaraki, a unique experience that inspired me in various ways. Ever since, my research motto and overall stance towards the world could be summarized as 'reflect, contest, and explore'.

Another element that broadened my horizon as a scholar was eventually taking up the role as a supervisor myself and collaborating with doctoral students from different disciplinary or theoretical backgrounds. The passion and curiosity of these young people, all eager to explore and understand important societal issues and questions, motivates me and takes me into new strands of research and traditions of literature. They challenge me to expand my own perspective and thereby reflect on my positionality, making the academic career a never-ending journey of exploration.

How do global power relations and colonial heritage transpire through international news media?

During my career, I have spent a lot of time and effort to investigate this question, so it is not easy to provide a concise answer. I believe global power relations are articulated on every level of the news cycle. For instance, looking at news sources, global dissemination of news is and has been dominated by a limited number of news agencies, all situated in the major economic, political and military regions of the world. Their selection is driven by certain interests and can lead to the exclusion or concealment of certain events, actors or processes. Numerous studies have also demonstrated that the resulting news output is biased in several ways. To name a few findings that are consistently confirmed by research, I can think of the geographical agenda of foreign news being skewed towards the leading geopolitical powers in terms of attention. Thematically, the Global South is generally associated with negative events of war, conflict, poverty or other cases of human suffering. Underlying this all is often a very Eurocentric understanding of the world, hinting at manifestations of Orientalism in the way Western news media think about and report on world events.

Likewise, traces of a colonial history are still present in contemporary media content. Former colonies are for instance higher on the news agenda of the former colonizer, and vice versa, as the historical ties fulfil the important news selection criteria or news values of proximity and relevance. We also see that the various manifest and latent hierarchies related to the colonial period and their underlying structures largely remain unchallenged. In reporting on events in the former colony, Western media tend to represent the foreign actors as passive, without agency and/or still entangled in a relationship of dependency, thus confirming the (constructed) difference in hierarchy.

Can you explain the concept of domestication in news media?

Most scholars refer to the basic definition of domestication as a journalistic practice to make foreign news events more appealing, relevant and interesting to domestic audiences. While the practice is not new at all and is well-known to journalists and other practitioners worldwide, I feel academic interest in the issue is rather scarce. To my knowledge, not that many studies have focused on domestication, which is a pity given its important implications for audiences' understanding of global events. Lately, more research is investigating the different modes and degrees of domestication as well as audience reactions towards the practice. Interestingly, together with Eline Huiberts we found that audiences apply strategies of domestication themselves when interpreting international news and making sense of it.

Having said that, it is necessary to point out the downside of domestication as well. While being applauded for its potential to bring the global closer to the local, the risk of subtly enforcing an ethnocentric view on the world is real and should not be left unquestioned. Knowing that general audience interest in foreign news is not that high, if journalists evaluate foreign events in their selection process on the grounds of their potential to be domesticated, we risk raising the threshold for foreign affairs even more. For instance, one way to domesticate is to look for compatriots who witnessed the foreign event. Research has shown that this eyewitness perspective of someone who is 'like us' helps domestic audiences to feel involved and emotionally engaged with the distant event and the distant others. The

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perceived absence of said 'domestic' perspective might result in a shorter piece or even a decision to not include that story in the news output at all. In sum, so-called 'pure' foreign events that lack the potential of domestication have a smaller chance to be selected and picked up by media outlets, despite their inherent news value.

How big of a role do you believe the media can play in mobilising international responses to humanitarian crises?

I honestly believe that media are very crucial and essential in this regard. For my students, I like to refer to a well-known quote by Suzanne Franks who stated that "disasters ... only exist when covered by the media". Sadly, my own research on Belgian news media showed that about 70% of all disasters are not covered by the media. While Belgium is of course not the universal benchmark for other countries, it is fair to argue that the overall majority of disasters or humanitarian crises are known about only by those directly affected. To put the crucial role of media simply, when you do not know about something, how could you be expected to respond to it? The answer generally is that you cannot, unless you are personally connected to the event or invested in charity organisations. As most people experience the world largely or only through the media as the late Roger Silverstone once eloquently said, this represents a major problem to many humanitarian crises and NGOs in gaining audience attention and eventually financial support through governmental and audience donations.

Of course, receiving media attention is not the sole factor that determines the degree and extent of international support. Unfortunately, a hierarchy of suffering plays an important role here. Crises that are perceived as closer due to historical ties, cultural affinity, geographical distance, and so on, will be higher on that ranking than more distant events. Studies have also pointed towards the presence of NGOs in the affected region as a beneficial factor that could incite news and audience awareness for the event. Lastly, it is perhaps wise to stress that these are not mathematical rules or written in stone as every crisis is different and audiences as well as journalists may react in very different ways.

How does non-Western media compare to Western media in its representation of international news?

Although I believe there are definitely regional differences, I must start with acknowledging that most international studies sketch a quite consistent picture of international news reporting regardless of the region. As said before, the world's leading countries in terms of geopolitical, economic and military power tend to receive the most attention worldwide. Take a newspaper in Vietnam and one in Finland, chances are reasonably high you will find a story on the United States of America in both news outlets. Having said that, the Vietnamese newspaper will probably differ in its overall geographical news agenda by reporting relatively more on Asian countries than its Finnish counterpart. Likewise for so-called elite actors. A Scandinavian celebrity will not attract the same amount of attention in Vietnam as he or she does in Finland. Thematically, international news is worldwide dominated by hard news – being politics, war and conflict, and economics.

Basically, what we see here are rather universal tendencies in international news output and representation, complimented by more minor regional differences. The latter can also be related to the framing or discursive representation of events. For instance, Asian countries are believed to adhere to a more collectivistic culture and way of living which can manifest itself in the way foreign events are being reported on. Accordingly, these journalists might stress different aspects of a story, pay attention to other topics or derive from a more human interest driven approach to international news coverage, as is more often the case in individualistic cultures such as most Western countries. Coming back to the earlier point of de-westernizing academic research, I do think there is still a lot of ground to be covered in this field as not that much is known about (local) journalistic practices in non-Western settings.

How have contemporary communication developments influenced the way audiences respond to distant suffering?

As said before, I see a lot of changes related to fast technological developments and their affordances. Not in the sense of a revolution, as I believe more in the notion of an evolution and an intensification of already existing patterns

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of audience behaviour. Additionally, audiences and scholars alike are still exploring and experiencing these contemporary developments at this very moment, making it not always easy to take a step back and look over what is happening.

For now, I do see a mixed impact on the way audiences can respond to distant suffering. On the positive side, due to their inherent interactive and networked nature, social media platforms make it so much easier to get connected and informed on distant events. For humanitarian crises which might fail to be picked up by traditional media, the online environment with its many communities offers new options to attract attention and raise awareness. It further facilitates the actual audience engagement and lowers the threshold to take action. A well-known example is the 'donate' button introduced by Facebook, allowing people to easily support charity organizations with a simple click.

On the other hand, we see a number of more worrying tendencies. The idea of echo chambers or online bubbles is very real and could potentially mean that people cut themselves off from the news about humanitarian crises or be confronted with fake news stories and other types of misinformation that might lead to distrust or detachment. On a more individual level of engagement, we can question the personal motives behind online manifestations of solidarity expressed by liking or sharing a story and adjusting the profile picture to show pity and compassion for the cause of a suffering other. Are these rather effortless acts of sharing truly about caring? Or are there personal benefits to be gained in displaying such behaviour, ranging from upscaling one's social capital to appeasing their moral conscience? Questions and concerns that are definitely in need of more research.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Collaborate. Not only in the traditional sense of starting up joint research projects, article collaborations and so forth, but what worked for me the best is to attend conferences or visit universities and just talk to senior peers in your field *about* your field. They have the best vantage point to overview the field, they see the needs and are well-equipped to identify the research gaps, but due to their positions they are also mostly deprived of the time to conduct the research themselves. I see it as a very beneficial moment of dialogue to immerse yourself in their personal experiences, insights and thoughts about new and innovative directions. Be inspired and let them inspire your future work. In my experience, established scholars are very open towards such conversations.

Secondly, as stated before, challenge your own position and perspective, be self-aware and self-critical at all times. These moments of reflection are, however, easily lost in the daily hustle and bustle of academic life, so be attentive to reserve some time and even to block a fixed slot in your monthly schedule. Attending lectures, PhD defences, or symposia that are thematically out of the comfort zone of your own research is also very helpful in broadening your scope and enhancing your critical mindset.