

Transcript TrustTalk podcast Interview Judit Neurink

Interviewer: Judit, you are a veteran journalist, especially known for your work as a Middle East correspondent for major newspapers. From 2008 to 2013, you trained young Kurdish journalists in a media centre in Iraq.

Judit Neurink: Yes.

Interviewer: In your most recent book, "Violence Is Never Far Away"(in Dutch, "*Geweld is nooit ver weg*"). It is not yet translated into English, I think.

Judit Neurink: No, not yet. We're working on it.

Interviewer: Working on it. OK, great. You write in the book about your experiences during the 10 years you worked in Iraq. When I approached you to be interviewed on trust and journalism, you recalled your time as a journalist in Iraq as a constant reminder of trust, lie and cheat. And you gave me a telling example from the last chapter of your book called Trust is Not for Sale. Maybe you can tell us a little bit more about that.

Judit Neurink: This example is about a minority group in Iraq, the Yazidis, and I worked quite, quite a bit with them, interviewed them after the women who were enslaved by the terror group ISIS came back, escaped. And in those stories, it was very important to interview them in their own cultural setting to realize how difficult these girls are and how difficult an experience these girls had have had. What I found was that a lot of my colleagues were not so dedicated and in in keeping the promises that that they did to the girls, for instance, they usually didn't want to be filmed or photographed and at least not published in in in a way that they could be recognized as the family was still in in the caliphate imprisonment. And I found that they were

Interviewer: afraid of retaliation

Judit Neurink: Yes, exactly. And I found that a lot of my colleagues actually abused the trust that the girls put in them. They were telling these terrible stories, thinking that this was a way that their fate would get into the news, into the world. But they did that thinking that at least they would be there, would not be endangered and is endangered, at least their loved ones. So

and there was another side to it as well. When you talk to the girls, a lot of the NGO workers that were there as well said you need to get this out, the world needs to know it. But after I did a lot of these conversations, after there's so many of them, the girls were like, Yeah, why should I talk to you? Because we don't see any effect. There still is ISIS and there still is no movement to get our girls out. So why and then I almost felt as if I was betraying their trust, although, of course, I never promised that.

Interviewer: I see. So a good example of how important trust is in your work as a journalist.

Judit Neurink: Yes.

Interviewer: So you left Iraq after 10 years working there, right?

Judit Neurink: Yes.

Interviewer: Were you in any way disappointed in what a journalist can achieve in such difficult circumstances?

Judit Neurink: Yes, I was I was quite disappointed. Actually I had trained journalists for five years and the first five years of my stay in Iraqi Kurdistan. And I was really thinking that I could help the democracy develop by making the media better. But I found that the party media was so important, so unchangeable.

Interviewer: You mean the media from the

Judit Neurink: From the different parties, from the different Kurdish and Iraqi parties, all of them, after Saddam's fall, had their own TV, their own radio, their own media outlets on the Internet. And they were all really telling their own lies, which is the big problem. And I was trying to tell journalists to stop lying and to tell the truth. And when you work for a party media, that's not that's not possible. And that was not only that I saw with the journalist in the country, I also saw it as a cultural strait somehow. In the culture in Iraq, it is very impolite, to be honest. So if something is offered to you, you must always say no. And only after a number of no's, you can let yourself be convinced that it is OK. But this is so ingrained in the culture that it

is very difficult for people to tell the truth, and you see this somehow or another coming back in the media. So I was really disappointed in the end on the how media were working in Iraq

Interviewer: And how much influence you could have,

Judit Neurink: Of course. Yeah, I think my influence in the end was very little, even though I still know some of the students that we helped that we educated. And some of them are in very good jobs and they and they make the best of it. But the majority, no, they had to go back into the party system and they still lie. That's the big problem.

Interviewer: We come to talk about trust in the media further. But one concept, impartiality is often used as one of the most important attributes of a good journalist. So the question comes to mind, especially for a journalist who has spent most of her work abroad, like yourself, is there any impartial journalism?

Judit Neurink: I don't think so. I think that in the end, you bring yourself into your trade because it is you who decides on a subject. It's you who decides on who to talk to. It's you who decides on what to ask. So it's your own cultural baggage, your own cultural background that you bring. And of course, when you educate yourself and you understand more about a country and you understand more about the situation, your interviewing becomes better and your impartiality may grow in that way as well. But I don't think it's possible. And I think the most important thing really in the end is that you need to always check the other side. And this is where impartiality comes in. If you only bring your own opinion, the opinion of one person, I think a story can't be impartial. You cannot be impartial. But as soon as you look at other sides of stories, other opinions, if you go to someone and check what the person has told you is really true, you get near to it. So my policy has always been let the reader decide, let me give him or her or the viewer or the listener. Let me give him or her the different standpoints, the different viewpoints, and let the reader decide what he thinks is the truth. But nowadays, that's not done so much anymore. It's more and more opinionated journalism. That's it's the journalism that shows that he or she thinks that this is really what is important.

Interviewer: That brings me to my next question. There is hardly a profession to be found where trust is more under serious stress than being a journalist. So how do you deal with that in your work?

Judit Neurink: I find and this is really something that is part of these times, I find it's getting more difficult for people to reply to requests to talk to you. There's a lot of impoliteness as well, becoming part of my trade. You can send emails and never get a reply. And this happens now so much. It was never like that. And I get a lot of people now who do no longer want to talk. And I think that that is part of the trust issue. There's a lot of people out there that do not no longer think that's journalism, are playing a good role. They think that they will become part of something that they don't want to be part of. They don't trust journalists to put their story in a good way. And there's another side of it as well. And this makes it so strangely balanced that at the same time, I see that there there's a lot of regimes and governments that become more scared and more worried about journalism. In my region, for instance, I don't know if I should still travel through Turkey. I see a lot of my colleagues being picked up just for being critical, sometimes just for being critical on social media. I myself have been very critical the last couple of years towards the government in Kurdistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, which is getting more and more autocratic. For the moment, I am like, I don't know, people are warning me, don't come back at the moment. Because also there, journalists are being picked up, they are being put in prison, so this is a very strange on the one hand, you see governments getting more scared and on the other hand, you see civilians not trusting media anymore. So I cannot really tie those two together. I don't really see why that those two movements are there at the same time.

Interviewer: The alarming increase in verbal and physical attacks against journalists that sometimes come with this attitude against journalism, we saw that in the US against journalists covering the January 6 assault on the US Capitol, but also in our own country in The Netherlands. Most recently, journalists were physically attacked while trying to interview churchgoers in the heavily religious enclave Urk. So I was wondering, what is the root cause of this increase in violence against journalists?

Judit Neurink: Yeah, it's a very good question. I don't have the answer, but I think insecurity plays a big role. I think in this society we get such a lot of information that's coming over us and we don't really know what to trust anymore. And here you have trust again. And then at the

same time, the trust in politics is also sliding. And we are for instance, you can see at the moment Dutch prime minister who is called to the parliament and has been found to have been well, is it lying or keeping the truth behind his hand, whatever it is. But this makes trust in politics, of course, an issue. And you see that often civilians see journalists as part of politics, even though officially and to ourselves we are the Fourth Power. We're supposed to be the one checking up on politics and on politicians. And it is a very strange movement at the same time, you see all these conflicting movements happening because journalists played a huge role in the Netherlands in showing that there was a big scandal going on with the tax services and by which I think it is, at least 100,000 people were victim

Interviewer: the *"Toeslagen affaire"*

Judit Neurink: Exactly, yes. It was journalists that brought this out together with a couple of politicians. And yet still this trust is not back in journalism.

Interviewer: The Reuters Institute and Oxford University have launched what they called a Trust-In-News in news project, and they publish their first report in December last year. One of the outcomes is that fewer than four in 10 people across 40 markets say they typically trust news. Fewer than four, so that means more than six that don't trust. And so while trust has fallen by double digit margins in recent years, in many places, we talked about it in Holland, but the same is true for, for example, the United Kingdom as they found in this project. In other countries, more stable overall trends conceal stark and growing partisan divides. So how does that worry you as a journalist, this outcome?

Judit Neurink: Yes, of course, because in the end, why do we report not just because we enjoy the job, but we really think that we are doing something for the society. And if you are not trusted anymore, then why should you go on reporting? I think one of the problems where this derives from is that also the public sees that there is less diversity. I feel that media and journalism being taken into a couple of big firms now and this is going on worldwide where the same stories are recycled the whole time. And that's not really adding to the trust of the people. People want diversity. They do, even though it makes it more difficult for them to decide what

Interviewer: you mean diversity in sources?

Judit Neurink: in sources, yes, absolutely. For instance, we freelancers, I'm a freelance journalist for most of my life, we are getting harder and harder time because these bigger firms are recycling the stories, we can sell less stories because they are being recycled. And that has a result that also I see more of the news, more of the news comes from press agencies and no longer from freelancers. So the diversity is going down on all levels and I feel that there is more news is getting into the same hands and that doesn't make you trusted anymore, because what people want to see is the news seen from different angles. And now you have just the big firms and just the press agencies and just a handful of journalists. And it's always the same talking heads that we see on TV as well. And it's it is not really helping to make people trust you.

Interviewer: Maybe we should bring the fake news in the role of fake news into the equation, because what you just said is also fed by the fact that people, when they read the social media and maybe other outlets as well, can't really trust what they read or what they watch, because a lot of what is being said and written turns out to be fake. So how does it has an influence on your work as a journalist who try to always hear both parties and come up with the facts?

Judit Neurink: Yeah now you see people go to the Internet to find alternatives. And the problem is searching for alternatives, they do not really know how to search in a good way. So they get stuck and in this information circle, almost, that the Googles and the other big internet companies have made. If you search for one subject, you will keep on searching in a sort of small bowl. And it is really it's an echo chamber where you get to. This is one of the big problems, I think, and I see one of the reasons for this, a couple of years ago when I was doing the training, giving the training in Iraq, there were a lot of media companies that came to me and asked if we could do training in civil journalism. Now, I have always refused to do that because I'm like journalism is not just something that you learn in an afternoon. It is a lifestyle. It's it is something you really have to learn in schooling. Civil journalism has a big problem, and that is the civil journalists don't really check. Do they care about if they lie, if they put their opinion somewhere. And I see now a lot of civil journalism, especially in Iraq, is making the problems. And people don't care what they are writing as long as they are writing it. And some people just take it for the truth.

Interviewer: I apologise for my ignorance, but you are talking about civic journalism as opposed to

Judit Neurink: as opposed to professional journalism

Interviewer: I see. OK, so you mean the journalism by

Judit Neurink: civilians

Interviewer: take myself for example, if I write something on a blog or on social media, I'm not doing that as a journalist, but as a private person having an opinion. And I don't if I Google, then then I get the same algorithms. And probably what I'm looking for is added to what I'm searching for, confirming my views.

Judit Neurink: Yes, exactly. That's what it is. Yeah. And the problem with journalism from civilians and in Iraq, this is a lot of young people who are activists, is that journalism becomes activism and it shouldn't be as far as I'm concerned. Iraq is a country where fake news was used by Saddam Hussein. He would use it to feed to his civilians to keep the truth away. But a lot of people nowadays seem to think that it is not just a dictator like Saddam who does this kind of thing. It's also normal governments, normal politicians who are using media in this way. And this, I think the only way to get out of this trap that we have got ourselves in, is more education, education on how to use internet and education about the dangers of it. And in Iraq, what's needed very badly is education in how to think in a critical way. They are educated in a system where people just learn things by heart. They never learn how to discuss. For instance, debating is very difficult in that country, the schooling system needs to make people more aware of how to think in a critical way.

Interviewer: We're talking about the critics, should journalists not be critical also about themselves in a sense that, well, how do I perform my task as a journalist? How many times do you see that stories are being overblown that don't double check, as you just said earlier, is is a trade for journalism, but not all of them do that. So, in other words, in how much do journalists contribute themselves to distrust of journalism?

Judit Neurink: I'm afraid we do. Yes, I'm afraid we do. Some people make themselves bigger than they should be. If you look at a journalists bringing up stories that they have not checked enough, then, yeah, we are to blame, indeed. But I think in general, journalists who like their job and actually I love my job when you feel like that, you don't you don't want to do that because you feel that you are there to report and to help people to decide on things. And so it is a mind set, really. It's a mentality that we're talking about.

Interviewer: Stanford professor Ted Glasser asked about the relation between journalism's objectivity, said that journalism needs, and I'm quoting him, "free itself from this notion of objectivity to develop a sense of social justice". Do you agree with him?

Judit Neurink: No, I don't. I think there's already too many opinions out there. I think that if you are a journalist, you should make very clear when you are writing a story or why when you are giving your opinion, you shouldn't mix those two. It's always been one of the key things of my trainings. I'm really very much against opinionated journalism. And I don't think that it's useful, to be quite honest. As I said before, activism and journalism are two completely different things for me.

Judit Neurink: Yeah, but you have to agree with me that maybe it's not your type of journalism that you fancy, but there are quite a number of your colleagues who actually do.

Judit Neurink: I know. I know they do. And but I don't think it's the way to inform people in a good way, because the moment that you are an activist, you are not interested in the other side. You're just interested in the other side that you support. So that means that activist activism in journalism could very well have an influence on the information that you give. It might be not as diverse as it should be

Interviewer: If you were to advise the current generation young journalists how to handle trust matters in journalism, what would you tell them or teach them?

Judit Neurink: Well, the first thing is really stick to the truth and don't lie. That's the main one. Because if people that read you or see you or listen to you find out that what you have been saying is not true, they will lose their trust in you. And the next time that they read you or

listen or see you, the next time they are like, OK, he or she is saying this, but is this really what I want to believe? Because is this person really is someone I can trust? And I think it's very important for journalists to keep their ears and their eyes open, to see trends, to see changes, to listen to what people say, the different opinions that they have. And we already touched on that. Don't make yourself bigger than you are. Don't make yourself more important. In the end, we are instruments in a society we're instruments in a democracy, we're not the ones that are the famous. This is not what it's all about. Fame. What it's all about is information and giving the right information and helping people to use information in a good way.

Interviewer: One of the things that obviously you as a journalist most experience many times is that you talked about being honest and truthful. But if you rely yourself on facts and sources like a video these days of modern technology, you can't even be sure whether what you actually see is actually the truth. It's manipulated. It is faked. So how what means does a journalist have in his or her power to check what he hears or sees is actually the truth.

Judit Neurink: And this is a very interesting and difficult development as well. You can even fake a prime minister saying certain things that he will never say or probably didn't say. The only way you can you can find out if it's true is, is check with what he or she has said before. Is this very odd? In that case, you should check even further, see if you find more sources. Saying the same is really the main journalistic rule. One source no, no source. I have always been telling my students. And so it is really, again, back to basics, checking to find as many, yeah, find as much information as you can on that subject. But I agree this is a very difficult development. In Iraq, I get fake news through videos and I have now sort of understood what I should look at and how I can prevent from falling into the trap. But with this new development, we will have to learn that all over again. And I'm sure there will be all kinds of ways that eventually we will be able to do that, but until then, we just have to be careful like everybody who goes on the internet, you still have to be careful to believe what you see.

Interviewer: So journalistic organizations like Bellingcat, they are probably very helpful, I guess, when you are confronted with so-called news that technically you'll be able to check whether it's actually true, what's being video-ed there or said or

Judit Neurink: And Bellingcat is doing a great job. And I have heard them in the beginning when they were just when you were just starting on what they are doing. They are an essential part of what happened in technology society and journalists have to have to check if the images that are fed are, for instance, do we get new videos or do we get old videos? This is one thing that happens a lot in Iraq. People pick up an old video and use it as a proof for something. Bellingcat is good at showing where did something happen? They actually they share the tools with us as well. But to do that, I must say you have to be savvy in technology. And I hope that that my younger colleagues will be able to do that. But to be very honest, I'm not that savvy. So I have to use my instinct in a lot of cases. And, you know, with instinct, they're not always completely full proof.

Interviewer: To deep fakes from the truth, is also an art, I guess. Well, that shows that there is still a lot to be said, but we have limited time in the podcast. So Judit, thank you very much for your insights and the conversation we had about journalism and trust. And the last thing I wanted to say to you is that as a journalist, you must be surprised like I am now I make this podcast on trust, how many days pass that trust is repeatedly an issue. You are referring to our political discussion in the Netherlands these days about what happened or what didn't happen or whether somebody wrote something or whether he didn't wrote something and stuff like that. Trust has become the core issue in many of these subjects.

Judit Neurink: It's true. Yeah, it's a big problem indeed. I mean, because it's in a negative way and the trust it is really a it's becoming a problem.

Interviewer: Anyway, let's conclude with that. Thank you very much for being our guest today, And wish you all the best in your, work as a journalist.

Judit Neurink: Ok, thank you very much. And you too with TrustTalk.