

Putting the politics into investigative reporting

Richard Lance Keeble examines in depth a report into 'global vulture capitalism' by the Australian journalist Antony Loewenstein and argues that its investigative power emerges to a large extent from his overtly activist stance.

Antony Loewenstein is an Australian investigative reporter, freelance author, photographer, blogger and campaigner. He has written for a wide range of publications – both mainstream and alternative – such as the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Green Left Weekly*, *New Matilda* and *Counterpunch*. His books include *My Israel Question* (2006) and *The Blogging Revolution* (2008 and 2011). His 2010 ABC Radio National feature documentary, *A Different Kind of Jew*, was a finalist in the UN Media Peace Awards. And his book, *Profits of Doom: How Vulture Capitalism Swallowing the World* (2013) has been followed up with a documentary film, *Disaster Capitalism*, about aid, development and politics in Afghanistan, Haiti and Papua New Guinea.ⁱ

Profits of Doom also serves as a useful case study to examine Loewenstein's investigative strategy in more detail. As this chapter will argue, Loewenstein draws creatively from a wide range of genres – peace journalism, investigative reporting, literary, long-form journalism, counter journalism and activist reporting – making his reportage both important and original. In particular, the study will focus on his investigative techniques, his ideological/political attitude – and his distinctive investigative writing style.

Overview

Building on Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), Loewenstein focuses 'not just on environmental catastrophe, war and the hidden costs of foreign aid, but also on what happens when the resources sector and detention centres are privatised' (2013: xvi). He travels to the Curtin Immigration Detention Centre in remotest Western Australia; to Christmas Island, which he describes as 'the prison in the Pacific'; to Papua New Guinea to see how the mining boom has impacted on the country; to Pakistan and Afghanistan to examine the role of privatised militaries and intelligence gatherers. And finally in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, he witnesses the collusion between multi-nationals, NGOs, government officials, armed UN troops, aid groups and donors 'making a packet in the pursuit of profit' and not at all concerned about promoting democracy or freedom (ibid: xix).

Investigative techniques

Travel to remote places

Loewenstein's travelling to far-away, often dangerous places is a clear, distinguishing feature of his journalism. The secrecy surrounding the subjects he tackles is reflected in their geographical remoteness. Of the Curtin Detention Centre, he writes that it's 'surrounded by scrubby desert as far as the eye can see. I can't imagine a more isolated place to be detained. ... This is no different to a

high-security prison in a remote area where escape is close to impossible. The aim is clearly to make detainees feel isolated, cut off from the millions of Australians who have no idea, or who don't care, about what is being done in their name' (ibid: 3, 5).

In Haiti, he walks alone through the streets of the capital, Port-au-Prince, many of the buildings still in ruin, three years after a massive earthquake ripped through the island on 12 January 2010. He writes (ibid: 170): 'My white face stands out, as it does elsewhere in Haiti, and many locals look suspiciously at me as I walk through the destroyed city. I understand that, as a journalist, I am seen as a leech by people in developing countries such as this – we come, we go. ... A man starts screaming at me. ... A woman in her forties wearing a floppy yellow hat and black top also screams at me, waving her arms to chase me away.' To visit Pul-E-Sokhta, a densely populated and rubbish-strewn area of Kabul notorious for drug use, he hires an armed policeman to protect him.

Face-to-face interviews/conversations

One of the reasons he takes the risk of travelling to remote places is to engage in face-to-face interviews and more informal conversations with important sources. As he writes in the Introduction (ibid: xvii): 'The effects of policies crafted in Western capitals have clear ramifications for citizens all around the world, but only if we care to look. This book considers the view from below, the experiences of people who are all too often invisible in the daily media cycle.'

And being on the spot allows him to examine the complexity of the issues: people respond in many different ways to the advance of predatory Western corporations across the globe. Thus, while investigating the detention centres on Christmas Island (CI) he finds some voices pro, some anti. There's Harry, an Australian who has been on CI for nearly two decades. 'He tells me that he opposes the detention centre because of the environmental degradation caused by the amount of resources, such as water and timber, required to run the place' (ibid: 45). Elsewhere, he writes: 'CI's shopkeepers are happy with the detention centre, as food prices keep going up' (ibid: 48).

At Curtin, he manages to speak to some detainees. For instance, 'Tamil detainee Agilan says that most refugees come to Australia to escape war and find a better life, but that the extensive time spent in detention sucks away their hope. He tells me that many people in Curtin self-harm and cry each day because they're frustrated with the lack of progress on their claims, left in limbo seemingly indefinitely' (ibid: 48).

But Loewenstein does not speak just to the victims of rampant global privatisation. He also finds time to interview representatives of companies running the operations as well as leading politicians. To some extent, this strategy reflects a conventional notion of balance. But, given the overall overt partisanship of the writing, these interviews are always presented in a necessary, critical context. For instance, in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, to investigative private military companies (PMCs), he engages in a one-and-a-half-hour conversation (not an interview, he stresses) with Jack, whose PMC was the first to arrive after the October 2001 US-led invasion. 'Responding to the idea that Afghan sovereignty is undermined when PMCs are at work, Jack says: "The US is not capable of running empires." He points out that Washington's occupation of the country was done so badly that it was inevitable that outside forces would enter the fray to make money' (ibid: 133).

Reliance on leaks

A great deal of investigative reporting relies on leaks from whistleblowers (Knightley 2011). Revelations about US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan by Private Bradley/Chelsea Manning in 2010, about US/UK global surveillance by the NSA contractor Edward Snowden in 2013 and about the scandal of offshore banking by the world's super-wealthy elite in the Panama Papers, in April 2016, are just the latest in a long line of leaks exposing corruption at high levels. Loewenstein also uses evidence drawn from leaks. For instance, he reports that a Serco employee has leaked to him 'a cache of internal documents that detailed massive price gouging of the federal government by the

multinational, extreme rates of self-harm among detained refugees across the country, the non-reporting of mistakes to avoid government abatements, and a work culture designed to ignore the rights of asylum seekers in order to maximise profit' (2013: 14).

And while investigating PMCs in Pakistan, a leading, anonymous journalist in Karachi passes to him 'a list of sixty-two former senior figures in the Pakistan army who now work for PMCs but maintain close ties with their old colleagues'.

Counter journalism

Milan Rai, editor of *Peace News*, has highlighted the value of 'counter journalism' to reporting such as Loewenstein's that challenges the militarisation of culture and foreign policy: in other words, peace journalism (Keeble, Tulloch and Zollmann 2010). While stressing the relevance of the propaganda model proposed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) to an understanding of the operations of the dominant consensus in the corporate media, Rai suggests there is still considerable room for 'leakiness' and 'for small fragments of disruptive information to bob up in the onrushing river of propaganda' (2010: 216). In the same way, Loewenstein uses reports in the corporate media when they can support his overall argument. Thus, alongside information drawn from alternative sources such as *Crikey*, *Democracy Now!*, *Dissent*, *Green Left Weekly*, *New Matilda*, *The Nation* and *Truthdig*, he also references stories in corporate media like ABC Radio, the *Australian*, the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Washington Post*.

Delving deeply: Synthesising a vast range of sources

Loewenstein's investigative work is distinctive in the way in which he is able to synthesise information and views from a vast range of sources: books, journals, interviews, academic studies, broadcast programmes, WikiLeaks cables. At the end, there are 30 pages in very small type of notes accompanying the text – indicating clearly the vast amount of research conducted for the investigations.

Investigative writing style

Doing it the literary journalistic way

Loewenstein's investigative writing, throughout, is colourful and engaging. There is a deliberate literary feel to his many descriptions of the remote locations he visits (Keeble and Tulloch 2012 and 2014; Ricketson 2014; Joseph 2017). For instance, he says of Port-au-Prince: 'Half-destroyed buildings lean precariously along the city's roads; the street vendors selling wares in their shadows are risking the very real possibility of injury or death. Ivy wraps itself around cracked concrete and massive amounts of garbage litter the streets. Water runs everywhere, along with sewage, spilling out of broken pipes that are yet to be repaired' (2013: 169). This eye-witness, descriptive writing adds an extra sense of authenticity to the reporting.

The 'I' voice

In addition, Loewenstein throughout, with the use of the 'I' voice, stresses his personal involvement. Rather like a Dickensian 'flaneur' strolling through the streets of London (Tulloch 2007), he takes us with him on a 'wander' through the busy streets of Arawa, Papua New Guinea, 'in the clinging humidity' (2013: 107). 'As I wander around Arawa, women are visible on the streets and I am able to speak to them in markets, shops and hotels to get their views. But generally, women struggle to be heard here' (ibid: 109).

'Proud to be an activist'

Most importantly, Loewenstein's reporting reflects an overall *political activist* approach. As he says in the Introduction (ibid: xvi): 'I am proud to be an activist and a journalist.' The activist is very different from the *campaigning* journalist. Many corporate media (both national and local) run campaigns: to

ban free plastic bags, to save the local hospital, to decriminalise cannabis – and so on. Campaigning is, then, consistent with the notions of ‘professional autonomy and independence’ (Keeble 2009: 10-11). The activist journalist, on the other hand, sees all journalism as essentially political – given the political economy of the media and its closeness to dominant economic, cultural and ideological forces – and overtly ties their political engagement in society with their journalism (Keeble 2010).

Thus, when he visits the site of energy multinational Woodside’s planned \$40 billion LNG (liquefied natural gas) plant at James Price Point, 60 kilometres north of Broome, Western Australia, he goes with representatives of the Wilderness Society, an NGO dedicated to the environment, fighting climate change and maintaining clean air and water (2013: 63). And when he investigates the Curtin Immigration Centre he declares his political bias from the start by travelling with Caroline Fleay, a lecturer at Curtin University’s Centre for Human Rights Education ‘and a tireless advocate for asylum seekers’.

Loewenstein’s activism also informs his writing style – which is always intent on highlighting the political, historical and global aspects of his investigations. For Loewenstein, the privatisation of detention facilities, warfare and intelligence since 9/11 is global phenomenon and can only be fully understood via a radical critique of capitalism: ‘Every place I investigate is culturally, politically and socially different, but what connects them all is that they are subjected to the predatory ideology of corporations aiming to make money on a global scale.’

Loewenstein’s activist stance permeates all his writing but is particularly evident towards the end of his investigations when he indulges in overtly politically rhetorical flourishes. For instance, at the end of his chapter on Afghanistan, he writes: ‘A different future for Afghanistan must be forged, one in which aid is coupled to sovereignty. Trophy projects must be abandoned and the will of the Afghan people respected. The building of civil and political institutions, without foreign for-profit corporations being intimately involved in the process, is vital’ (2013: 168).

Conclusion

Ultimately, Loewenstein’s political (rather than any ‘professional’) commitments can be seen to have inspired his daring and courageous investigative reporting. Indeed, today, much of the best investigative journalism appears on radical, alternative sites (Forde 2011; Harcup 2013). For instance, check out *consortiumnews.com*, *counterpunch.org*, *newsbud.com*, *theferret.scot*, *mondediplo.com*, *tomdispatch.com*, *whowhatwhy.org*, *wsws.org* and *zerohedge.com*. There are reasons for optimism.

Note

¹ <http://antonyloewenstein.com/bio/>, accessed on 23 January 2018. His latest book, *Disaster Capitalism: Making a Killing out of Catastrophe*, is published by Verso. It forms the basis for his film *Disaster Capitalism* (<http://disastercapitalismfilm.com>)

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