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Seeking the limits

On 20 June 2007 Bart Tromp died, at the age of 62. Just two weeks earlier, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I had been sitting with him under a luminous sky at a terrace at the Nieuwmarkt, in the oldest part of Amsterdam. We spoke for two hours. We had been in contact before, by email and telephone, about the article he wrote for the first issue of *The Broker*, but this was the first time I had met him in person.

Of course I had an idea of him, because I had come across his writings over many years, in newspapers and all kinds of magazines, and in reports of conferences or political meetings. They gave me the impression that Tromp was an obstinate and somewhat arrogant grumbler. That, I now realized, was a totally distorted image I had gained from the media. Bart Tromp was very friendly, open and not at all condescending. We spoke about all kinds of things. About the universities and institutes he had worked for. About the evaluation project he had just finished in Belgium. About his experiences with magazines and editorial boards. About how the views and interests of publishers and financiers are always different from those of editors and writers. About the new book he was writing. He described the elements of the book and promised he would transform one part – about 'blood feuds' – into an article for *The Broker*.

We clicked, partly because of the common language we spoke. He told me he was a 'Wallersteinian', an adherent of the world system theory of Immanuel Wallerstein (a written message from Wallenstein was read out at Tromp's memorial service), which I had studied thoroughly at university.

I was happy to find that we shared many interests, and to hear that he would be willing to write more for *The Broker*. This fitted well with my idea for the magazine: to create a more or less solid 'community' of writers from various disciplines. Some would have experience in journalism, but enough knowledge of academia to get to the bottom of scientific discussions. Others would have a university background, but good enough writing skills and an understanding of the policy field to be interesting and understandable to a broad range of readers.

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It is not easy to find people who have both sets of skills; usually it is either/or. But Bart Tromp certainly had both – he was an example of an academic who could write for 'ordinary' people, always to the point, sharp, and relating to current policy issues.

I did have some doubts when, in the run-up to the publication of the first issue of *The Broker*, I got the offer to publish his article on Iraq. He was introduced to me by his very good friend Monika Sie Dhian Ho, who is also a member of the editorial committee of *The Broker*. I knew Tromp as a polemicist, a person who sought the limits in his columns. I like that, but *The Broker* wishes to and must distinguish itself from the opinion magazines. Opinions (from academics) are allowed in *The Broker*, but they must be well founded. That's what drew me over the line: Tromp's opinions were based on sound knowledge and clear arguments. A profile that would fit with the editorial formula of *The Broker*.

Another source of doubt was that Tromp wanted to write a review of nine books about the war in Iraq, almost all of them written by investigative journalists. One of the main features of *The Broker* is that its articles should use academic, rather than journalistic or other sources. Not because academics have a monopoly on truth, but because that is the 'niche' that is not yet adequately covered by any other magazine on development and globalization.

After a brief discussion, Tromp stated that these books could easily match, and sometimes offered even better researched arguments than those of 'real' academics. An academic was trying to convince a journalist of the value of good investigative journalism.

He said that with their analytical approaches the authors offered explanations of what was going on in Iraq. At my request he added some sentences to the final text: 'The authors have relied on fieldwork, discussions with decision makers and other parties and documents involved. This is a form of contemporary historiography that can only be improved upon and supplemented when in due time (government) archives become accessible'.

It will always remain a grey area, but I decided to broaden my definition of what could be used as sources of articles. *The Broker* wants to provide thorough, 'evidence-based' articles. Debatable, I agree, and more refined definitions are welcome. But it was this very widely read academic Bart Tromp who convinced me.

He had found his limit. *The Broker* will keep on seeking. ■