

Turning a small event into a theory of everything

Interview with New York based investigative journalist Atossa Abrahamian

American journalist and author Atossa Abrahamian, based in New York, was asked beginning of this year by *The Guardian* to write on Luxembourg's Space Resources Initiative. Her investigation was published on the 15th of September 2017 under the title "How a tax haven is leading the race to privatise space" (see www.theguardian.com). It provides a detailed introduction into Luxembourg's plans to become a hub for commercial space exploitation and gives the international readership of *The Guardian* a full presentation of our country. The article is by any standards a "long read" (it will take you more than half an hour to read it). Why should anyone read this? Maybe because it is well constructed, full of interesting facts, a few side-stories and – it is funny. We asked Atossa Abrahamian how she works and how this specific article came to be.

Can you tell us something about the general characteristics of the Guardians "Long Read"?

Atossa Abrahamian: A long-read is typically a story that's 3 000 - 7 000 words, with a strong narrative (beginning, middle, and end) and some sort of bigger point it's trying to make – either about the people involved, the ideas they have, or the world we live in.

Why do The Guardian and other British or American magazines and newspapers (on and offline) invest in this format?

AA: Ever since media moved primarily online, I think there's been a resurgence of interest in the format for a couple of reasons. The first is that readers get tired of quick, easily digestible content and want something more thoughtful to spend half an hour or an hour with. The second is anxiety: editors, writers and academics worry that they're being put out of business, and want to encourage this kind of

writing in a way to counteract the broader trends governing digital media (Twitter, 'explainer' articles, short-form).

What kind of subjects are suitable for a very long story?

AA: Anything about Luxembourg! I'm joking – in my experience, stories that work best have to have good characters and scenes that you can see in your mind. Some dialogue goes a long way, as do physical descriptions of what you're talking about. A classic 'longform' theme is true crime or mystery, because the way these cases unfold lends itself well to narrative.

The hardest stories to tell in this format are the ones that turn a small event or factoid or press release into a theory of everything, which is kind of what I did with my piece on space. At first glance, Luxembourg's investment in space seemed quirky and silly - but upon further inves-

tigation, it revealed a tremendous amount about the country's history, economy, and *modus operandi*. It was really hard to turn that into a narrative because it was in a lot of ways the narrative of Luxembourg's economic history, and very few people are interested in that. But by connecting it to broader trends in the global economy, I think it worked well.

How did you discover the subject? Who did you convince at The Guardian and how? Or did The Guardian commission the piece? If the latter, why did they ask you?

AA: I'm obsessed with small countries: what they offer, how they're run, who they serve, and the day-to-day reality of being in a state the size of a city (or smaller.) A lot of my work touches on the role of small countries in a big world, so Luxembourg was a natural area of interest. I'm also really interested in global tax policy and offshore, so when I read Gabriel Zucman's *Hidden Wealth of Nations* my mind

was blown by the magnitude of Luxembourg's global influence.

A couple of months later, I saw news about Luxembourg in space, and I put two and two together. I then went down a research rabbit hole for a day just learning about property rights in outer space. So when my wonderful editor at *The Guardian* asked if I had any ideas, I sent him this one (and some others he didn't care for.) The whole story took about a year to complete for various logistical reasons.

How did you proceed?

AA: First, I pitched the story to my editor, and made some phone calls to the Luxembourgish ministry of the economy and to NASA to gather more information. Once I had a well-formed pitch, *The Guardian* assigned it, and I began calling more people: economists, space researchers, government officials.

Right away, I was faced with the problem of not having very much action – economics in space are awfully theoretical! – so I put the story on hold for a while to see if the space resources law would pass and if any conferences or events would take place in advance of it. You can imagine how thrilled I was, then, to get an email in the spring from Etienne Schneider's office inviting me to an event in California and Washington where they would be pitching SpaceResources.lu to Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. I signed up to follow them on their trip on condition that I paid my way, and after that, the story had a shape and a setting and real characters, so I was able to hang all my ideas about space and sovereignty on actual events.

What difficulties did you encounter, if any?

AA: It was difficult to find the action (see above) and also, spending such a long time on a story makes you lose track of your notes and progress, so it was hard to stay organized.

What was your state of mind when you started and how did your analysis of the subject evolve?

AA: It was gratifying that my initial theory – that the space resources initiative was simply an evolution of a very old Luxembourgish economic development tactic – held up. It surprised me that many people in Luxembourg were actually quite willing to admit that the country sells its sovereignty as a matter of course; an member of parliament even wrote the book *Les fruits de la souveraineté nationale*, which is quite a title for an economics textbook! For the record, I don't think there is anything inherently wrong with this tactic – it simply shows the extent to which global capitalism pushes small states to be competitive – but I enjoyed connecting the dots between that and my past work on the sale of passports.

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How long did it take you to write the article?

AA: Beginning to end, about a year, but I was obviously not working on this full-time.

How did you finance this project?

AA: The newspaper paid for my travel expenses to go to California. I visited Luxembourg while I was on a separate trip to Switzerland to see family, and I got that ticket with frequent flier miles, so it wasn't a huge expense.

I insisted on paying for the trip myself via the newspaper, so I never felt compromised. That was very important. And of course, it's hard to be critical of people you get to know a bit and even come to like – I personally found everyone I met absolutely charming. I also don't think my article was particularly negative – I was simply laying out historical and economic facts and adding a level of analysis.

What style, what writing techniques are required to keep the reader interested?

AA: It's easy to get lost in the weeds with a subject like this one, which is technical,

dense, and obscure. My editor had to cut out entire paragraphs about corporate telecommunications history and VAT! I think the key is to keep coming back to things people recognize, or appealing to a certain interest or anxiety in the reader. A mix of big-picture vision and granular detail tends to do the trick.

How did The Guardian influence the result of your work? Were there any advice or requests by The Guardian at the end?

AA: The title was up to the editor, but I thought they chose it well. My editors were smart in that they kept pushing me to address why anyone should care about such a scheme. They also cut the story by a few thousand words, and helped me structure it in a way that made sense, but there were no particular demands that I recall.

Were you happy with the final result?

AA: Very much! It took a long time but I came out of it feeling like I'd said what I wanted to say.

What kind of reactions did you get from readers?

AA: Americans and non-Luxembourgish people thought, "wow, Luxembourg is crazy!" Marxist academics seemed to love the story, as did some left-leaning scholars of space. From Luxembourg, I got a couple of angry notes about the way I described the language (sorry!) and one comment that I'd succumbed to clichés. But overall I think the response was positive.

Do you know how many readers clicked on the article? and for how long they stayed on-line reading?

AA: I don't have that information!

Can you build on this experience?

AA: It made me even more convinced that small countries are overlooked and incredibly important to how we understand global capitalism.

Thank you, Ms. Abrahamian!

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