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Decolonizing Conflict Journalism Studies: A Critical Review of Research on Fixers

Johana Kotišová and Mark Deuze

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical review of scholarly research on fixers, the local collaborators of foreign correspondents, in conflict reporting. Based on a thematic analysis of work that addresses news fixing, we summarize what we know about fixers in conflict zones while using postcolonial lens to further develop some critical arguments that are already present in the body of research. Existing studies well describe what fixers do, who they are, and the inequalities in safety, in authority over the content of reporting, and in the distribution of money that haunt conflict reporting. However, we argue that most of the research too readily accepts as a starting point the division between West and non-West, which assumes that fixers are fundamentally different from and unequal to Western correspondents and emphasizes these disparate identities without questioning them, thus reproducing fixers’ otherness and exoticism. To gain a better position for promoting creative justice, we suggest that future research practices and questions could be recalibrated in line with the postcolonial move and the current reconfiguration of the political and epistemic relations between the world’s regions.

KEYWORDS

Fixers; local producers; critical review; conflict journalism; postcolonial theory; transnational reporting

Introduction

Over the last two decades, foreign newsgathering has undergone profound changes. Due to shrinking news budgets, there has been a decline in the resources that media companies devote to coverage of foreign events. Moreover, especially since the beginning of the "war on terror" in the early 2000s, the security situation in some regions has degraded to such an extent that the presence and movement of (Western) journalists have become prohibitively dangerous (e.g., Murrell 2010, 2013, 2015; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Palmer 2015, 2018b). To retain access to local sources and information, news companies increasingly outsource newswork, including the authority but also the risks of eyewitnesses, to various local actors participating in newswork while enjoying certain levels of autonomy and responsibility – fixers, stringers, and freelance reporters (Grossman
The shift away from staff reporters to freelancers (Istek 2017; Pendry 2015) and the closer collaboration between staff correspondents and fixers transformed information collection and journalistic storytelling so much that authors have been predicting “the demise of international correspondence as we know it” (Khan 2019, 1). Yet, the global journalism industry and many individual journalists consistently downplay the power of these increasingly important actors of international newsgathering, especially the fixers, and have kept them least valued and most hidden in the final product (Baloch and Andersen 2019; Bishara 2006; Crecch 2018; Hoxha and Andersen 2019; Khan 2019; Murrell 2009, 2010, 2015, 2019; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Palmer 2018a; Plaut and Klein 2019).

Recently, fixers, especially those working in war zones, have gained the attention of media scholars (Jukes 2019). This paper seeks to critically review the existing literature on fixers in conflict zones. After a short description of the review strategy, we summarize what we know and address some of the shortcomings in the literature by arguing that we have not adequately theorized the collaboration among the various actors of global newsgathering, as a postcolonial issue (cf. Shome 2016). Although postcolonial studies is an established field theorizing transnational inequalities and (neo)colonial realities, various authors have illustrated and justified the importance of postcolonial thinking for communication studies and vice versa (e.g., Nothias 2020; Shome and Hegde 2002; Shome 2016), and the study of foreign correspondence has always been closely related to anthropology (e.g., Pedelt 1995; Bishara 2006) – a discipline where the postcolonial move resonates very strongly – there exist few studies that apply postcolonial perspectives in practice. The published studies of fixers and foreign correspondence that are informed by postcolonial theory tend to be informed mainly by Said’s classic Orientalism (1978; see Khan 2019; Plaut and Klein 2019), which is potentially problematic. Postcolonial critics (e.g., Elie 2013; Shome 2016; Shome and Hegde 2002) generally agree that the monolithic, one-directional hierarchies defined by Said (1978) and others do not hold in the current “post-exotic” (Elie 2013) historical conjuncture when “the lines separating the East from the West, and North from the South, are increasingly becoming porous under conditions of globalization” (Shome and Hegde 2002, 257). Consequently, we observe constant (dis)connections and reconnections of spaces and constantly shifting power relations. A more explicit engagement with contemporary postcolonial theory would therefore enhance the accuracy and ethics of studies of transnational conflict reporting.

First, addressing transnational reporting explicitly from the postcolonial perspective would enable scholars to do justice to the complexity of the postcolonial condition. As we show below, existing studies tend to very well describe what fixers (are supposed to) do and who they are (supposed to be), the inequalities in safety, in authority over the content of reporting, and in the distribution of money that haunt war correspondence. However, they have not been as forthcoming in interpreting the ambivalence that characterizes fixers’ work, in addressing fixers’ complex identities, and in examining all-important power vectors. Instead, most of the literature too readily accepts as a starting point the assumption that fixers are fundamentally different from and unequal to Western correspondents. The studies sparsely touch upon the liminality, in-between-ness, hybridity and complexity of fixers’ identities. These concepts are not only fixers’
defining features and thus require further attention, but, together with the concept of agency, also are at the center of interest of postcolonial theory (Shome and Hegde 2002). Only if we look at fixers as an integral, at times powerful as well as powerless actors in the global ecosystem of newsgathering, we can better grasp their professional identities and networks, while fully acknowledging their “affective proximity” (Al-Ghazzi 2021) to conflicts and the implications thereof.

Second, the practice of global journalism is marked by neocolonial hegemonies that threaten not only quality of news and the human dignity of its practitioners (across the news production chain), but also bare lives. Especially in conflict reporting, the interplay of new and inherited colonial/imperial hegemonies and power vectors is pronounced on an everyday, tangible basis (see e.g., Nothias 2020; Pedelty 1995). Postcolonial, i.e., inherently political critique seems to be an accurate answer to these hegemonies for, as Shome and Hegde (2002) write, postcolonial thinking enables more socially responsible problematization of communication, and therefore can lead to more just and equitable forms of knowledge and news production. In turn, imagining creative justice (Banks 2017), involving an “ethical duty of care” (Filer 2010) and the responsibility of all newworkers and media organizations to reduce harms, must be based on the values of equity and partnership rather than exoticization and othering – which is impossible without acknowledging the richness of the global newsgatherers’ identities. Only research acknowledging the richness of the identities can help imagine a comprehensive institutional approach to the dangers faced by fixers, e.g., more accessible support/training programs.

**The Critical Review**

This paper is based on a critical review of the scholarly literature regarding the local journalistic colleagues and collaborators of foreign reporters, with a focus on conflict reporting. The review combines a narrative approach and critical interpretive synthesis (see Dixon-Woods et al. 2006; Xiao and Watson 2019), the latter being particularly relevant for challenging research areas and for a reconceptualization of research questions. In what follows, we provide a structured and systematic descriptive account of what we can learn from the existing literature and then create a synthesizing argument aiming at a recalibration of research questions and practices.

Because of the scarcity of relevant research, the literature search was explorative, exhaustive, and comprehensive. This means that we searched for any research publications including the keywords “fixers”, “stringers” (later supplemented by “freelance journalism” or “freelance journalists”), and “local producers” concerning media (“media”) in the full English-language EBSCOhost database. As an emic term preferred by some fixers, we included the keyword “local producers” (Murrell 2009, 2019; Palmer 2019b), which proved to be fruitless. In total, we screened 351 entries. The main inclusion criteria for texts were having fixers, stringers, and local collaborators of foreign reporters as either the main focus or at least as a side topic; belonging to a relevant discipline (i.e., not the natural sciences where “fixer” refers to a chemical preservative); and quality (peer-reviewed or with clearly explained methodology). While reading the selected texts, we occasionally conducted forward and backward searches and author-based searches. The final sample consists of 39 academic texts on many different topics that can be grouped into four key themes (see Table 1). The vast majority of texts are academic
papers, but we also included two monographs, one edited volume, and a short introduction to a special issue. We excluded encyclopedic entries (primarily because these do not report on primary data).

We coded the studies using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) without setting any conceptual or thematic limits. The next sections regroup the key themes identified during the analytical process (including changes in foreign reporting, relations between media and fixers, power circulation, fixers’ empowerment, fixers’ work, fixers’ political role, fixers’ invisibility, outsourcing of risk, and danger) into a critical-synthesizing narrative. We draw from the studies, recognize them as significant contributions, while also pointing to their shortcomings.

The majority of the cited research is based on semi-structured, in-depth, or oral history interviews with staff international reporters and photographers, stringers and freelance photographers, local journalists, support staff, and NGO representatives (Al-Ghazzi 2021; Erickson and Hamilton 2006; Filer 2010; Hoxha and Andersen 2019; Istek 2017; Murrell 2010, 2013, 2015; Otto and Meyer 2012; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Palmer 2018a, 2019b; Pendry 2015; Palmer and Melki, 2018; Plaut and Klein 2019; Şahin 2021; Seo 2016, 2019), often conducted via an electronic means of communication such as telephone and Skype. In qualitative interviews, individuals engage in discourses that point to the building of (professional) boundaries grounded in identity construction, rather than to an unproblematic, objective reality (see Bishop 1999; Carlson and Lewis 2015). Consequently, the researchers did not investigate fixers and their work as such, but rather the various groups’ more or less genuine beliefs and stories about fixers. Some of the shortcomings and inconsistencies articulated in the sections on content, finances, and safety might stem from the lack of reflexivity about the sense-making nature of interviewing.

### How does the Research Define Fixers?

Existing research defines fixers as locals who assist or collaborate with foreign correspondents in making news while playing three main roles: as logisticians, editors, and cultural translators (e.g., Murrell 2010; Palmer 2019b).

As logisticians, fixers create the material, spatial and logistical base and infrastructure of newsgathering. These activities include driving, hotel booking, securing petrol, security assessment/management, securing relevant sources, arranging interviews, making phone calls, arranging permits, and navigating unfamiliar locations (Bishara 2006; Murrell 2010, 2015, 2019; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Palmer 2018a; 2019b; Paterson, Andresen, and

<table>
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<tr>
<th>General theme</th>
<th>No. of resources</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fixers and their cooperation with foreign correspondents and parachute reporters</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developments and recent changes in foreign reporting, the shift towards freelancing, and related risks</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpreting and translating in foreign correspondence</td>
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Hoxha 2011; Plaut and Klein 2019). Camera work is also considered a part of the logistical role (Murrell 2019).

As editors, fixers directly contribute to the tasks of newsmaking, such as interviewing (especially vox pops or featuring notorious militant leaders), cooperation in interviewing, selecting interviewees, suggesting stories, sharing interesting and little-known information, generating stories, backgrounding, and providing summaries of events to which their clients lack access and summaries of news in the local language that the fixers have read or listened to (Baloch and Andersen 2019; Bishara 2006; Murrell 2010, 2015; Palmer 2018a, 2019b; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Plaut and Klein 2019).

As cultural translators, fixers help foreign reporters not only to understand conversations and events held in the local language but also to get along in the local culture, which is often unfamiliar—especially for parachute reporters. Translating texts written in the local language and interpreting during interviews are among the most common functions of fixers, the typical mediating language being English (Murrell 2009, 2015, 2019; Palmer 2018a, 2019a). But language translation is only a part of broader cultural translation. Fixers mediate between reporters and the local way of life (Hoxha and Andersen 2019), and act “as an interface between the correspondent, the sources, and the site” (Palmer 2018a, 321).

Importantly, while playing these roles, fixers often involve their personal interests, engage their lives, safety, values, opinions, networks, families, and property, and sometimes put them on the line (see Moon 2019).

**Inequalities: Content, Finance, and Safety**

The reviewed literature is marked by a self-contradictory discourse. On one hand, it generally stresses the structural inequalities haunting the world of foreign newsgathering, arguing that fixers typically get the short end of the stick because of their less privileged national and ethnic identities and the post-colonial bias of the dominant West against the colonized East (Khan 2019; Plaut and Klein 2019; Seo 2016). Even those authors who do not explicitly build on Edward Said’s pivotal work on orientalism (Said 1978) assume a Western/non-Western dichotomy (Bishara 2006; Creech 2018; Murrell 2010, 2013, 2019; Palmer 2018a, 2019a; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Wake 2016), thus accepting and reproducing hierarchical constructions of the West/Global North and East/Global South (cf. Elie 2013; Shome and Hegde 2002).

Yet the same authors mention many empirical examples showing that power relations in global newsgathering are much more complex and nuanced than this. Plaut and Klein (2019: 1699) argue that casting “the fixer as either a victim of neo-colonial relations, stripped of agency by the foreign journalist or as a manipulative, sneaky local who is trying to dupe the journalist into telling his or her story” are two versions of the same narrative that plays on age-old colonial stereotypes. Murrell claims that the “global dominance paradigm” and the related notion of media imperialism cannot do justice to local (fixers’) influence (Murrell 2013, 2015; see also Palmer 2019b). In other words, as we argue below, research findings that fit into the current configuration of the world (Elie 2013) and follow trends in research on creative labor that tend to signal complexity and mutually beneficial or exploitative relationships in media work (e.g., Deuze 2007;
Banks (2017) sometimes do not match the obsolete general theoretical mindset of the existing research on fixers.

In what follows, we summarize the documented inequalities while pointing to the contradictory empirical details and further develop Plaut and Klein’s argument that the power dynamic that characterizes the cooperation between locals and foreign correspondents is far from static and inevitable, and is constantly negotiated at the levels of finances, safety, and content (Plaut and Klein 2019).

**The Politics of Content**

The results of existing research imply that the power to construct social reality, and to communicate transcultural spheres is ultimately in the hands of the foreign correspondents and is inherently linked to their role. Moreover, the power to determine media content is often magnified by the power of the news organization that the reporter works for (Bebawi and Evans 2019). Fixers, on the contrary, rarely get a byline or acknowledgment in published reports (Baloch and Andersen 2019; Murrell 2009, 2019; Palmer 2018a, 2019b). In turn, the absent credit discursively limits the possession of “the story” and “the truth” (as much as “the work”) to the single foreign reporter, seemingly operating in a vacuum.

Some of the reviewed papers (e.g., Palmer and Fontan 2007; Plaut and Klein 2019) suggest that reporters and fixers tend to disagree on the extent to which the reporters’ reliance on fixers impacts their journalism, so much so that “[j]ournalists and fixers are literally experiencing the realities of ‘fixing’ differently” (Plaut and Klein 2019, 1708). The fixers see their editorial role and influence over the journalistic piece as more important than the journalists, who sometimes ignore or even outright reject fixers’ influence on the grounds of impropriety and compromising journalistic values. In Plaut and Klein’s (2019) survey of 450 journalists and fixers from 70 countries, 38% of journalists said they never relied on fixers for editorial guidance, whereas 45% of fixers said journalists always relied on them for editorial guidance.

However, it follows from the editorial role and the logic of (cultural) translation – which is far from being a straightforward and unproblematic conversion (see Amich 2013; Murrell 2015; Palmer 2019a; Salama-Carr 2007) – that fixers do play a very important role in the process of newsgathering and newsmaking. Fixers lend the journalists their own eyes and ears, and most information that the journalists receive passes through fixers (Murrell 2009, 2010; Palmer and Fontan 2007). Therefore, fixers control reporters’ field of perception in several ways.

To begin with, some contexts are simply off-limits to the often ethnically different foreign reporters without a chaperone who fits in. The cultural translation includes knowing and informing the reporters how things go, the local ways of organizing media events, and providing updates and explanations about political developments (Bishara 2006) – an activity that is particularly important in fast-developing contexts. For example, Paterson, Andresen, and Hoxha (2011) show how the Kosovar fixers mediated between the Kosovo Albanian tradition of ad hoc planning and “western-style” organization. In active conflict zones, the cultural translation can even become a part of the cultural and linguistic warring (Amich 2013, 21):
These contexts are characterised by abundant cultural disparities which are surrounded by violence, danger, pain, suffering and mistrust. Thus, the interpreter’s task multiplies and their role consequently becomes extremely important in deciphering linguistic and cultural differences and bringing together two or more (sometimes opposing) realities.

Bishara (2006, 29) persuasively illustrates how in some situations, the Palestinian fixers “bring to their work the habitus of a person living under occupation”. This habitus includes knowing how to identify certain sounds and dangers, how to negotiate with officials and soldiers, and how to efficiently pass through checkpoints (see also Amich 2013). Bridging the potentially dangerous cultural divide means not only making people at ease in the unknown context but also getting the story.

By “translating” their country – i.e., conveying the history and complexity of the local culture and politics to the reporters while guiding them and explaining who is who – fixers inevitably engage in politics and shape the reporters’ perspectives, repertoires, and discourses (Bishara 2006; Palmer 2019a; Salama-Carr 2007). Some foreign reporters interviewed for Palmer and Fontan’s study mentioned the theoretical possibility that fixers can turn the journalist into a propagandist on their behalf, which is why they preferred at times to change their fixers (Palmer and Fontan 2007), hire students or, in some cases, even teenagers (Murrell 2010), who are believed to be less likely to pursue a political agenda or to betray the reporter. The politics of cultural translation is most visible in totalitarian/authoritarian contexts such as North Korea or Rwanda where fixers are restricted and encouraged to self-censor by political forces (Moon 2019), or even allocated from the ranks of a country’s intelligence agencies (based on foreign reporters’ nationality, social rank, and temperament), and their primary role is to surveil (Seo 2019). The Pyongyang regime uses these “guides” not only to track the reporters and gather material on them but also to improve the country’s image. Another obvious example is Palestine, where Israeli officials fear that Palestinian journalists use their bias to exploit the media and damage Israel, so they actively try to limit Palestinian fixers’ influence over global newsgathering by refusing to issue press passes to Palestinian newsworkers from the Occupied Territories (Bishara 2006).

That said, both foreign correspondents and fixers often consider political affiliations irrelevant. Plaut and Klein’s study (2019) concluded that the correspondents relatively rarely ask the fixers about their political affiliations (50% ask sometimes or always), and only 6.6% of fixers often or always disclose it. Fixers are taken as “a tool – not a person – for the journalists’ story” (Plaut and Klein 2019, 1707).

A few points need to be made about the postulated politics of content. First, while the reviewed research is overall critical of the objectification and marginalization of fixers, it often seeks to categorize the individual activities and tasks performed by journalists and fixers and poses questions in such a way that reifies the boundary between the two groups (e.g., Plaut and Klein 2019). For example, the logistical role (e.g., Murrell 2019) does not cover all the production activities that fixers do. Some of these, like camera work, albeit craft-based and technical, are very close to the primary “mythical” creative labor such as writing (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011) – and thus to the editorial role. This attempt at categorization is thus a way in which the research stresses the distinction between the above-the-line foreign correspondents and fixers who may perform some editorial activities yet also do the below-the-line unskilled tasks (see Mayer 2011). In the same vein, the editorial role is close to the common journalistic roles of storyteller
and curator (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018) – i.e., to some of the “ordinary” journalistic roles. Taken together, the distinction between journalists’ and fixers’ roles does not seem to hold. By emphasizing the distinction, the research to date sidelines the messy reality of close cooperation in which fixers’ influence over news content cannot be isolated from that of reporters since fixing is “deeply entangled within the history, the politics, and the labour of conflict correspondence” (Palmer 2018a, 317).

The problem with the categories is also reflected in fixers’ views of their job title. Some fixers, as well as journalists and academics, see the term “fixer” as pejorative and inadequate, wrongly associating fixers’ tasks with unskilled labor or plumbing (Baloch and Andersen 2019; Murrell 2019; Plaut and Klein 2019), and prefer the terms “local producers”, “journalists” or “journalists-fixers” (Baloch and Andersen 2019; Plaut and Klein 2019). About 20% of Plaut and Klein’s survey respondents self-identified as “fixer-journalists”. This goes hand in hand with fixers’ changing roles (Baloch and Andersen 2019): Murrell (2010) observed that after the job of fixers for BBC became more editorial, BBC changed their job title to “producer”. Instead of focusing on logistics, journalism scholars could ask what is preventing the job title from catching up to reality. The question is critical since, for lack of better options, even those who identify as producers keep using the term “fixer” through gritted teeth to advertise their services. Consequently, authors and researchers who wish that their research topic is identifiable, including us, have little choice but to reproduce the wording that epitomizes and reifies the hierarchies in conflict reporting ecosystems (Ho 2017).

Furthermore, some important details are not (adequately/critically) interpreted, such as the finding that fixers often see themselves as a tool, too (Plaut and Klein 2019). Some authors also talk about fixers’ increasing professionalism through their frequent cooperation with foreign reporters and the hands-on training they receive while working (Baloch and Andersen 2019; Hoxha and Andersen 2019). These views reproduce the fixers’ position as Western journalists’ Others who still need to learn the Western-normative dominant understanding of journalistic professionalism and the role of journalism in democracy (Palmer 2018a), and thus cannot value the fixers’ ways of “professionalism” co-shaped by their affective proximity to the events they are both participating in and representing (Al-Ghazzi 2021). At the same time, the Western-normative perspective – sometimes held even by fixers themselves – is somewhat in contradiction to fixers’ ability to recognize what is wrong with the journalism they take part in and, relatedly, with the final stories. They criticize foreign reporters’ lack of knowledge and cultural sensitivity resulting in “fast food journalism” (Hoxha and Andersen 2019, 1742), bias, nationally-specific angles and agendas, stereotypical thinking, predefined – “lame” or “BS” – narratives (Palmer 2019a, 1789), simplification, villainization, ignorance of nuances, and naïveté in the field (Bishara 2006; Palmer 2018a, 2019a; Paterson, Andresen, and Hoxha 2011). This is based on what reporters want: they sometimes explicitly want controversies or extremes (Paterson, Andresen, and Hoxha 2011) – as very well depicted in the documentary film Show Me the War (Chaloupka 2016). When fixers feel that the coverage or the use of sources is inaccurate or when they are pressured to find controversies, some of them interfere and argue (Paterson, Andresen, and Hoxha 2011). Although these problems and paradoxes clearly point to the neocolonial hegemonies, more precisely, to the variety of power vectors in conflict reporting, they have so far remained at the periphery of the existing work that has focused mainly on fixers’ very existence and activities they do.
**Money and Precarity**

Previous research also focuses on the financial disadvantage of fixers compared to foreigners (Palmer 2018a). Seo (2016) describes the wage structure at the Associated Press, where locals get higher yet commensurate wages to locally employed newsworkers; the staff reporters are paid twice to ten times more, while locally-based stringers/expatriates get about half of the money of the staffers. While many stringers are later promoted to staff positions, the fixers “gain only limited and short-term profit from the working exchange” (Murrell 2019, 1680) and are only as good as their last gig. According to Plaut and Klein’s (2019) survey, few fixers rely on news fixing as their primary source of income and 75% of fixers have another occupation. Fixing is often only a supplementary source of income (see also Khan 2019). And not even in death are all equal. During the Vietnam War, the families of deceased American staffers got paid $100,000, European staffers’ families $50,000, and Vietnamese staffers’ families received $25,000 (Seo 2016). Correspondingly, fixers are sometimes bossed around and treated like interns (Palmer 2018a) – except in North Korea, where the situation is reversed (Seo 2019).

At the same time, Murrell (2014, 2019) has identified successful attempts at collective organizing. Newsworkers, filmmakers, and humanitarian workers have established groups and sites such as The Vulture Club, Hack Pack, World Fixer, NeedaFixer and more locally-specific platforms for networking in certain regions/countries. The most active users are often international journalists seeking collaborators around the globe or fixers who want to advertise their work. Over time, fixers have founded their own companies providing various services such as filming and translation. While some founders of these platforms and companies are motivated for conventional entrepreneurial reasons – expansion and profit – others do so to gain more power and agency, and to reduce their job-related hardship (Murrell 2019). Of course, such entrepreneurial activities can be criticized as acts of subjugation to neoliberal governmentality and self-entrepreneurship (Foucault 2008; Nörback 2021). On the other hand, these initiatives are also empowering, bolstering networks among the diverse actors of global newsmaking, enhancing fixers’ bargaining power, and thus improving their overall position (Murrell 2019).

Murrell’s research on collective organization is one of the first attempts to capture empowering practices within the fixers’ precarious work circumstances. Future research should do more to acknowledge the ambivalence that is inherent to all creative labor, including news fixing (see Kotišová 2019a). For example, part-time and short-term contracts allow fixers to enjoy the higher salary and prestige (and sometimes higher production standards) of work with leading media organizations, and at the same time benefit from the opportunity to do journalism in and for their local community (Bishara 2006). And, as Seo (2016) and Pedelty (1995) observe, the relationships among international staffers, local staffers, freelancers, and fixers working for the same company are not limited to money exchange but are often characterized by certain camaraderie and family-like ties (e.g., Murrell 2010; Seo 2016).

Moreover, the reviewed research never mentions that, when it comes to financial matters, job stability, and type of contracts, fixers are in an equivalent (precarious) position as many creative workers in the countries of the correspondents’ origin, where freelancing, self-employment, irregular work, short-term contracts, part-time jobs, income instability, erratic work schedule, and lack of a safety net are all common forms of
precarity among creative workers (e.g., Deuze and Witschge 2018; De Peuter 2011; Finkel et al. 2017). The hierarchies in foreign correspondence thus correspond to the more general hierarchy in journalism where war reporters are the elite members of the aristocracy who enjoy high status and autonomy (Tumber and Webster 2006; Hamilton 2009), and all other kinds of journalists are “lower-level”, enjoying less prestige and a less organizational care (e.g., Nörback 2021). Such a decontextualization may indeed make it seem that the financial inequalities are based solely on marginalized local national and ethnic identities (e.g., Palmer 2018a; Seo 2016), which is not entirely the case.

Safety and the Outsourcing of Risk

There is agreement within the reviewed body of work that the practice of putting one’s skin in the game in conflict reporting is extremely dangerous and typically outsourced to fixers (e.g., Grossman 2017; Palmer 2015, 2018a; Pendry 2015). Although putting oneself at risk, living in the field, and erasing the line between work and the rest of one’s life is considered a general rule within international correspondence (Bishara 2006; Pedalties 1995), it is the local fixers who embody the most materially insecure and physically dangerous forms of newstwork: “local journalists and fixers in conflict zones face the most severe threats of violence” (Creech 2018, 568). As mentioned above, the locals are also those who do the reporting in conflict zones when international staff and freelancers are absent for security reasons (Pendry 2015) and those who sometimes travel to the frontlines and attend planned protests and spontaneous demonstrations instead of foreign reporters, who stay in protected or “green” zones (Bishara 2006; Paterson, Andresen, and Hoxha 2011; Murrell 2010). Previous studies have argued that once their foreign colleagues leave, fixers can be punished for their clients’ culturally insensitive behavior and simply for having cooperated with foreigners/Westerners. They may be followed by domestic intelligence agencies, targeted as spies, imprisoned, tortured, killed, forced into exile and evacuated, face intimidation, and experience death threats and various context-specific types of risks (Baloch and Andersen 2019; Murrell 2010; Palmer 2018a, 2019a, 2019b). The issue of safety is particularly pressing across the Middle East, such as in regions of Syria and Iraq (see Grossman 2017; Seo 2016; Wake 2016) that are controlled by militant groups with little interest in international humanitarian law or journalists’ status as civilians and potentially – upon capture – as prisoners of war (Grossman 2017; Plaut and Klein 2019). The locally hired newsmakers have replaced a significant part of the international media corps in these regions. But locals often work without hostile environment training, insurance, or safety equipment (e.g., flak jackets) (Filer 2010; Jukes 2019; Khan 2019; Murrell 2019; Palmer 2018a, 2019b). Consequently, of the 1071 journalists who were killed between 2000 and 2021 for motives related to their job, 956 were locals; 753 of these locals covered war, politics, or human rights (CPJ 2020).

In some contexts, these threats come directly from governments and the military: Baloch and Andersen (2019) describe how threats made to Pakistani fixers working in Balochistan can be traced back not only to Islamist militants, but also to the Pakistani military, political parties, the government, and intelligence agencies. A similar situation exists in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where it is no exception when a Palestinian journalist or fixer – or, after all, a European reporter – is killed by Israeli Defense Forces. Bishara (2006) mentions, among other examples, the case of a cameraperson
for the Associated Press, Nazeh Darwazeh, who was shot dead by Israeli forces while he was filming Palestinians resisting an Israeli arrest raid: “the bullet that killed him went through his head and his camera” (Bishara 2006, 37).

Importantly, the reviewed research speaks of a culture of impunity where nine out of ten violent crimes against journalists remain unsolved (Jukes 2019; see also Baloch and Andersen 2019), despite the recent legal steps taken by the UN Security Council to end this impunity (Grossman 2017). Although professional funds and support bodies are doing much to improve the situation of both fixers and freelancers (e.g., Creech 2018), and there is a whole industry of security training (Plaut and Klein 2019), the support is still insufficient, poorly coordinated, and sometimes affordable only to staffers (Baloch and Andersen 2019; Jukes 2019). Thus, media organizations have yet to acknowledge that they have “an ‘ethical’ duty of care … to all employees, from correspondent to fixer” (Filer 2010, 128), and put it into practice.

However, again, some important details, notably that security seems not to be a major concern for fixers or journalists, and that fixers are believed to be those who are responsible for protecting foreign correspondents (Palmer 2019b; Plaut and Klein 2019), are taken as a proof that “some fixers internalize the logic of their Western employers” (Palmer 2018a, 328), i.e., of an unequal/unidirectional relationship and fixers’ internalized submission, and still wait to be further investigated. The very industry of security training, and the limited access to it, should be also further studied.

Second, a consequence of the outsourcing of conflict reporting labor that remains almost entirely neglected in the previous research is the emotional danger faced by fixers and local collaborators. The risks are potentially many and severe. Omar Al-Ghazzi (2021: 21), writing about Syrian journalists, says that the “emotional toll of first-hand witnessing of violence” has “the added layer that the tragedy is happening in one’s own country and is a result of authoritarian attempts to subjugate a rebelling population”. This applies to local newsworkers in any other conflict context, too (see also Bishara 2006). Grasping the local newsworkers’ proximity to suffering, violence, death, and their emotional labor is vital to understanding their everyday experience and precarity.

Another aspect of dangers faced by locals that has been neglected by research on fixers – most probably because of the flat definition of fixers, grounded in their exotic identity – is the gendered nature of the work. Palmer and Melki (2018), studying female war reporters, show how much the dangers, but also the public perception of female risk-taking and how these dangers are tackled by the reporters, are affected and informed by newsworkers’ gender identity. Women are not only more likely to be sexually assaulted, abducted, raped, or forced into “marriage”, but also often face verbal and online threats (Høiby and Ottosen 2015) and even receive more public condemnation for taking risks (Palmer and Melki, 2018). Høiby and Ottosen (2015) point out that female journalists face these risks especially when covering local conflicts. However, as Palmer and Melki (2018) argue, the female gender identity also provides resources for turning specific challenges into advantages. Taken together, gender cannot be thought away in postcolonial contexts, which is also the core argument of seminal postcolonial critiques (see, e.g., Spivak 1988; Mignolo 2011). To help imagine a more comprehensive institutional approach to the dangers faced by fixers, and to
make support/training programs more accessible, future research first needs to better understand the positionality of women in this historically male-dominated environment.

Third, when fixers are the main subject of scholarly study, the dangers they face are rarely put into context. Freelance conflict reporters are often surrounded by the same “culture of neglect” as fixers (Filer 2010, 127; see also Grossman 2017; Istek 2017; Wake 2016), and freelancers also make up a disproportionately high number of deaths among newsworkers (e.g., Pendry 2015). Of the journalists killed in the Syrian conflict since 2011, 38% were freelancers, compared to 25% worldwide during the same period (CPJ 2020). Although several dozen global (news) organizations in 2015 signed a protocol on “Freelance Journalist Safety Principles” aiming to better protect freelancers in hostile environments, major news organizations often working with freelancers, such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, TIME magazine, Al Jazeera and the European Pressphoto Agency, were not among the signatories (Grossman 2017; Istek 2017; see ACOS 2015). The situation is particularly acute among younger freelancers who, trying to start their careers, are willing to go to conflict zones without the necessary yet costly protection. At the same time, starting as a freelancer may be the only option to build one’s professional reputation (Kotišová 2019b). Failing to see the dangers as a continuum, where one’s local origin, ethnicity, and nationality are only some of the co-determinative factors, contributes to the construction of an inaccurately sharp contrast between staff correspondents and local fixers. Such boundary building and maintenance does not seem to be an efficient strategy to secure more equitable protection for the diverse actors of international newsgathering.

Conclusion: Towards a Postcolonial Approach

The points of critique articulated in our review have a common basis. In theory, some of the reviewed literature on fixers declares that seeing the various actors involved simply as either victim or an exploiter is both inaccurate and unethical (e.g., Plaut and Klein 2019; Murrell 2010). In practice, however, the research is still characterized by a persistent presumption of asymmetry between marginalized and deprived non-Western fixers and a privileged Western subject (the journalist and the researcher). The scholarship, some of which explicitly refers to early postcolonial thinkers (e.g., Khan 2019; Plaut and Klein 2019; Seo 2016), suffers from the same what Said’s work (1978) was criticized for – reproducing the East and West as static entities (Shome and Hegde 2002) where the West and the Other constitute one another, and where the foreign reporting cultures/professional groups are constructed along power polarities. Despite the fact that some of the empirical findings counter these assumptions, the reviewed research thus has remained fairly stuck in the early phases of anthropology characterized by the supposition that one can grasp the Other through knowing her strange, foreign, exotic culture as a static object (see Dervin 2012). This limitation marks the research by an epistemological lag vis-à-vis the current historical phase that transgresses the established polarities, trichotomies, and one-way power flows from West to East, from North to South, from First to Second and Third World (see Elie 2013; Shome and Hegde 2002).

The particular points of criticism outlined in this paper suggest that this relatively static construction of monolithic identities is caused by the fact that the current scholarship on fixers in conflict zones is still largely descriptive and exploratory, and thus tends to reduce
the richness and complexity of individual identities and network relations (cf. Shome and Hegde 2002). Scholars have constructed the Other (fixers) by referring to their culture in ways that ignore individual subjectivities and complexities and put them in opposition to the “in-group” of foreign reporters. The intersectional interplay of the cultural, ethnic, religious, national, class, gender, sexual, linguistic, esthetic, and political (Dervin 2012; Mignolo 2011) in the fluid identity formation (see Bauman 2004) mostly gives way to the implicit or explicit definition of a fixer solely through her/his belonging to a certain static nationality/ethnicity and occupation (e.g., Seo 2016). Despite the problems of conceiving of “nation” and “ethnicity” (see e.g., Dervin 2012), these defining features remain unquestioned. The research sticks to the traditional distinctions despite the current developments in the global newsgathering ecosystem where previous borders between us and them are increasingly blurred, and global newsmakers belonging to the most multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual, and gender diverse generation of today do not fit into the existing categories. Thanks to this diversity, contemporary global newsmakers are well positioned to work as cultural bridges between not only individual contexts but also the global and the local (Bebawi and Evans 2019).

We do not suggest disregarding fixers’ and reporters’ nationality or ethnicity. Instead, we recommend placing them into a broader constellation of constitutive and descriptive elements, thus diversifying the sphere of identity markers. Researchers need another architecture of knowledge production working with a new, more dynamic and diverse, less hegemonic, less dualistic and West-centric repertoire of concepts, theories, and epistemic categories. This can be said of journalism studies more generally (see also Witschge and Deuze 2020). Postcolonial rethinking of the type of questions to ask and conceptual apparatuses to deploy in the study of global newsgathering would allow to go beyond the descriptions of fixers’ activities and bring in the complexity of the current world and its identities:

“The postcolonial is more than a mere description of the past and present. Its theoretical value (…) lies precisely in its refusal of this here and there, then and now, home and abroad, perspective” (Shome and Hegde 2002, 263).

To better grasp the multiplicity of fixers’ identities, future research could embrace the postcolonial emphasis on identity, hybridity, and agency (ibid.) and bring in all historical-structural “nodes” that constantly articulate and are being articulated by the colonial and neocolonial differences such as a global racial/ethnic hierarchy, global hierarchies of genders and sexualities, spiritualities/religions, languages, forms of knowledge, esthetic forms, a particular global class formation, an international division of labor, etc. (Mignolo 2011). Paying attention to these concepts and nodes would help researchers of conflict reporting to more systematically think about the “scattered hegemonies” and hybrid identities in conflict correspondence (Grewal and Kaplan 1994 in Shome and Hegde 2002).

In particular, postcolonial openness would allow to dig deeper into some of the important paradoxes that stem from the local-global nexus that in many ways seem to characterize fixers’ professional identities. The reviewed body of work altogether points to the paradoxical requirements that foreign correspondents expect fixers to meet. The key values and desired features of fixers are trustworthiness, access to local contacts, proactivity, adaptability, senses of perspective and humor, persistence, and knowledgeability
about the international media market (Murrell 2010, 2013, 2019; Palmer and Fontan 2007). In other words, the ideal fixer must be 100% glocal, firmly situated in her/his motherland yet master of cosmopolitan skills and similar to the foreign reporters in outlook. Correspondingly, researchers describe the perfect fixer’s professional identity with words such as “bridge” (Palmer 2018a), but also “people like us” (Murrell 2013), which illustrates the double-sided requirements/self-conceptions. The most valued type of fixer is a local reporter, journalism student or, in some cases, local academic (Murrell 2015; Paterson, Andresen, and Hoxha 2011) who is at the same time a globalized citizen and has “absorbed Western cultural values and Western news values” (Murrell 2013, 75). However, with a few exceptions (Bishara 2006; Şahin 2021), previous research has not yet fully engaged with the implications of fixers’ double position and their affective proximity to the conflict (Al-Ghazzi 2021) on the relationship, and potential tension, between objectivity, distance, impartiality, and involvement in the local community, personal interests, and emotional experiences (Kotisova 2020). Future research might therefore focus on foreign correspondents’ paradoxical expectations and try to grasp how fixers’ positionality affects the inevitable entanglement of globality and locality, distance and proximity, detachment and attachment, objectivity and activism.

Beyond theoretical and conceptual interventions, we also propose an epistemological and methodological shift: the decolonization of methodologies (Smith 2021) used for studying transnational (conflict) reporting. The current, primarily “extraction” logic of research, guided by responsibilities oriented toward the academy, should be at least supplemented if not replaced by a paradigm of “insurgent” research (Gaudry 2011). Acknowledging that “[r]esearch is always a political process” (ibid.: 132), insurgent researchers assume responsibility toward the communities under investigation and promote community-based action.

Finally, the center/peripheries and other dualisms prominent in the literature should be abandoned, also for a political reason: because they “are the consequences of global linear thinking in the foundation of the modern colonial world” (Mignolo 2011, 17). A postcolonial approach would bring in a (more accurate) political orientation of the research. Cosmopolitan-minded policies and actions based on the distinction between Self and Other (and thus exoticization and othering) can be often experienced negatively (Gilmore 2014). In contrast, if scholars ground their advocacy of the “ethical duty of care” (Filer 2010) that media organizations have to all newsworkers in terms of empathy, objective respect to their work, equity, parity in participation in international newsgathering, and dialogue about the possible creative justice (Banks 2017), the practice of fulfilling such ethical duty may better respond to the contemporary global journalistic ecosystem. Before asking: “how could journalists better prepare themselves for this work, and in what ways could they be more transparent with their news audiences about their need to defer to local media employes? … What can news organizations do to protect fixers in the field, both before and after the foreign correspondents leave the site?” (Palmer 2018a, 329) we need to address the following questions: can care and equality mean a more stable job when juggling allows fixers to maintain both international prestige and local relevance (see Bishara 2006)? Can justice stem from accurate recognition when stepping out of anonymity is too dangerous (e.g., Murrell 2010)? Is equal pay the most relevant concept for people who are emotionally close to war? What do ethics, equality, and justice mean for diverse people participating in global newsmaking, and
how can they be achieved? Open-minded dialogue in articulating the ethical duty of care is extremely important: if we study transnational creative cooperation and seek to contribute to equality, we first need to find the culturally and individually specific currency of creative justice.

Notes

1. We choose the term “transnational” over “international” reporting to stress that the ecosystem of foreign reporting and collaboration transgresses the logic of national boundaries, involves actors who often operate in several countries, and is characterized by the blending of their identities. The chosen term also adds movement to the static denotations of the international and the national.
2. By neocolonialism, we mean “the largely economic rather than the largely territorial enterprise of imperialism” (Spivak 1999, 3).
3. The reason why we focus on conflict reporting is the extreme scarcity of relevant literature on non-conflict contexts.
4. It is symptomatic that we have no idea how fixers see/describe the traits of the ideal “Western” correspondent.

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