PAPER

Richard Pendry

‘Fixers’ as journalists: The emotional labour of locally hired news gatherers in Afghanistan who work for foreign correspondents

This study incorporates qualitative interviews, analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with current and former locally hired Afghan reporters (otherwise known as ‘fixers’) to examine the work they do as journalists in their own right. While research participants talked about the ways in which they exercise agency and autonomy they struggled to be taken seriously as journalists both by foreign journalists and other Afghans. Interviewees described some of the emotional consequences of the assumptions others made about them. The study illustrates how ‘fixing’ has both a global aspect and a local one for those doing it. Locally hired journalists reflect on the ways in which working for foreigners challenges local cultural norms. Yet at the same time, they struggle to fit into global industry work settings. Finally, since the job requires that difficult feelings be covered up in a work setting, it is suggested that ‘fixing’ can be seen as kind of emotional labour.

Key words: ‘fixers’, local journalists, Afghanistan, feelings, emotional labour, news, reporting

Introduction

Scholarly research into locally hired journalists (otherwise known as ‘fixers’) mostly concerns those working in areas of conflict. One strand highlights the exploitative, imperialist and colonial aspect of privileged, mostly white, ‘parachute journalists’ from the Global North who fail to give locally hired news workers due credit for the work they do on their behalf and push them to take disproportionate risks (Plaut and

Klein 2019). The Indian journalist Priyanka Borpujari, who has worked for international journalists as a 'fixer', writes: 'The title "foreign correspondent" has long been synonymous with whiteness, maleness, and imperialism – journalists fly in from North America, Europe and Australia to cover the poverty and wars of the non-Western world' (Borpujari 2019).

A second research strand examines the work of 'fixers' through the lens of affect theory and empathy, exploring the ways in which the emotional distance from upsetting events is different for global journalists and their locally hired colleagues, and the effect this has on the finished report (Kotišová 2023). The current research explores some of the professional, emotional and practical implications for locally hired reporters of operating in a unique work setting which is simultaneously global and local. 'Fixers' need to operate according to the norms of the global news industry yet have been hired precisely because they are also part of the local culture. This can be awkward emotional terrain to navigate.

'Fixing' in Afghanistan

The profession of 'fixing' has been a lucrative but high-risk occupation throughout nearly five decades of war for local news gatherers in Afghanistan who provided editorial, logistical and other types of support to foreign journalists, peaking during the occupation by US-led Nato forces in 2001-2021. During this period, killings of locally hired staff highlighted their vulnerability and perhaps expendability (Olds 2009). The death of the 'fixer' Sultan Munadi on 9 September 2009, during the rescue of his employer, *New York Times* journalist Stephen Farrell, by British Special Boat Service forces, drew attention to some problematic, culturally specific, aspects (*New York Times* 2009). Hospitality known as *melmastya* in the Pashtunwali social code of the Pashtun majority is universally practised by Afghans and freely offered to strangers including foreign journalists without thought of any reciprocity (Guest 2010: 886). Yet conservative Afghans such as members of the Taliban have strong religious and cultural taboos against interacting with foreigners. George Packer writes: 'The fixer is a target because he or she is with the foreign correspondent. Both are considered spies, but one is only an infidel, while the other [the 'fixer'] is something worse – an apostate, a traitor' (Packer 2009). Local equivalents of the term 'fixer' are also problematic. In both Dari and Pashto, *tarjoman*, or translator, has connotations of working for NATO, while *dallal* is a person who procures drugs or prostitutes. After the Taliban takeover in August 2021 many former 'fixers' left, while a new cohort faced severe restrictions on media (O'Donnell 2022). After international journalists left to cover the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Afghan 'fixers' struggled to find work. There is an exceptionally high level of emotional upset among locally hired staff in Afghanistan, the Trauma Fund for Afghan Journalists run by the Rory Peck Trust, a support group for freelances, being its only country-specific scheme (Rory Peck Trust n.d.).

Literature review

Given the longstanding ubiquity of 'fixers' in areas of conflict reporting (Arjomand 2022: 47-48; Ashraf 2022: 45-47; Pedelty 2013: 74-82; Seo 2016), it is significant that the first scholarly study of 'fixers' was Palmer and Fontan's (2007) research into the locally hired news professionals whom the Baghdad bureaux trained up to outsource their own risk in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of 2003. Examining why the academy had previously been unaware of such central actors in foreign newsgathering as 'fixers', and why it matters, points the way to the rationale for the current study. Possible reasons for the lack of research are threefold.

First, the methodological limitations in the seminal newsroom ethnographies which underpin so much of the basic theory of how news functions in the social sciences (Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1972; Fishman 1980). These examined not foreign news production, but the culture and practice of domestic reporting in big cities of the United States. Ethnographers secured access to newsrooms in news organisations to draw wider conclusions about how news works. Zelizer wrote that the continued influence of the classic news ethnographies of 1970s and 1980s sourcing is puzzling since they appear to be of universal applicability yet are, in fact, of questionable generalisability (2004: 69).

Second, an over-emphasis on seeing how foreign news works through the eyes of elite foreign correspondents. In a major global survey of 'fixers', Plaut and Klein point out that many earlier studies were written mostly from the perspective of the foreign journalists who employ them, giving less voice to the 'fixers' (Plaut and Klein 2019). The result is that the true contribution of locally hired help, including 'fixers', to foreign newsgathering is obscured. Journalists have a powerful interest in minimising the contribution others make to their news gathering. Foreign correspondents have always been an elite group at the top of the news hierarchy (Cohen 1965) and their sole agency has been over-emphasised. News organisations have long marketed correspondents as highly talented individuals, stressing their autonomy and agency at the expense of others who contribute to their reports. Williams writes: 'There is an idealised notion of the specialised foreign correspondent put forward by the profession and promoted in the autobiographies and books of many foreign correspondents' (2011: 174).

Third, a shortage of journalism scholars with a background in foreign news. Many of those who have researched 'fixers' in recent years have worked in news. The former Associated Press journalist Colleen Murrell published most of the pivotal early research (Murrell 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015) after her PhD supervisors questioned whether 'fixers' were worth writing about, having found nothing in the literature about them (Murrell 2015: x). Palmer had also worked in news (Palmer 2019). Ashraf, who had been a 'fixer' in Pakistan, wrote that the language employed by scholars and correspondents about 'fixers' could be dehumanising. For example, when they were referred to as [foreign] journalists' 'eyes

and ears' (Palmer and Fontan 2007) or 'hands' (Bishara 2006). In his monograph *The dark side of news fixing*, Ashraf wrote that such language tended to perpetuate the foreigners' view, that they were instruments or tools to be used, rather than colleagues or collaborators (Ashraf 2022: 49-50). In his Marxist analysis, he highlighted the human cost of becoming an instrument of labour (Hochschild 2012: 3) and depicted 'fixers' as victims of an exploitative, extractive global news industry. Ashraf said 'fixers' should be seen first and foremost as journalists.

> Every aspect of their legwork is journalistic and, therefore, editorial in orientation. We should not forget that fixers are local journalists in many parts of the world. Even if they are not, the skills they use are common in journalism found in their respective localities. This makes their news experience journalistic in essence (Ashraf 2021: 13)

Kotišová and Deuze call for fresh approaches, writing: 'Most of the literature too readily accepts as a starting point the assumption that fixers are fundamentally different from and unequal to Western correspondents. [Such] studies sparsely touch upon the liminality, in-betweenness, hybridity and complexity of fixers' identities' (2022: 1161). They point out that scholars tend not to put the exploitation of 'fixers' into the context of that experienced by other news workers and that 'fixers' are, in many respects, in the same boat as other freelances in news (ibid: 1171), being surrounded by the same 'culture of neglect'(Filer 2010: 127). The freelance news cameraman Vaughan Smith once complained at an awards ceremony that his television pictures, often obtained at great personal risk, were always being voiced over by a staff correspondent, and added that he had more often been shot in the course of his work than credited onscreen by the BBC (cited in Luft 2008). Even at the highest level of news there is bigfooting, which is the practice of a more senior person taking over the story. 'Think of me as the dentist,' BBC foreign editor John Simpson was supposed to have said to one correspondent who resented him coming on to his patch. 'It's jolly painful to see me, but it only happens a couple of times a year' (see Bowen 2007: 71-72). The lesson is that those with less power in more precarious positions are exploited. Many 'fixers' work in the gig economy without any formal contracts of employment, which puts them at the bottom of the news hierarchy.

Accordingly, there are two research questions:

RQ1. How do Afghan 'fixers' talk about their work as journalists?

RQ2. How do they feel about it?

Method

A total of 17 current or former 'fixers' were recruited to take part in this study, the author arriving at this final sample size after saturation was achieved with the emerging themes. Participants were identified from

their Twitter profiles (n=4), through the personal contacts of a 'fixer' in Kabul (n=12), and via the Meta/Facebook 'Vulture Club' group, an online marketplace for 'fixers' (Murrell 2019) (n=1). All were men, since it was not possible to locate a woman 'fixer'. Research participants had been doing the job for between 18 months and 29 years. Most were based in Kabul (n=10). Those who had moved abroad (n=7) had left because they had feared being targeted by the Taliban and with one exception this group was completely or largely unemployed. The Kabul-based participants were working less frequently than before the US withdrawal, and for less money. Three participants had been or were currently full-time staff reporters in one or another of the Kabul bureaux and two interviewees currently working in a Kabul news bureau described their roles as 'fixer/reporters'. All of these interviewees were included in the study because, despite their job title, they were expected to set up newsgathering for visiting foreign colleagues, otherwise known as 'parachute journalists' (Palmer and Fontan 2007: 21) regardless of their job title.

The current qualitative research aims to identify the feelings of locally hired reporters about the job and how they manage them. Semi-structured interviews using open and exploratory questions gather data, which is then subject to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This method foregrounds interviewees' interpretations and evaluations of their lived experiences (Etough and Smith 2008). Phenomenology implies a study of things as they are experienced by participants and its principal theoretical commitment is to a person's affective, physical and emotional states (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2021). Smith writes: 'IPA aims to explore in detail participants' personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that personal experience' (2004: 40). To choose IPA is, therefore, to express an interest in how interviewees make sense of the job and how they relate to others while doing it.

An interview schedule was drawn up (Table 1). The locally hired journalists were first asked to explain their work history and personal experiences of the job itself and their relations with their foreign journalists who employed them. Next, they were asked for detailed information and perspectives about how they worked. Finally, the interviewer asked them to reflect on how they made sense of both the work of news 'fixing' and their foreign journalist employers. Questions explored how locally hired journalists conducted their work, the extent to which they felt they had agency, the security challenges of the job and whether they felt they received due credit for their contribution. Questions evaluating foreign journalists were put in terms of what made an ideal foreign journalist employer.

For this study, 16 video interviews, lasting 47-132 minutes, were recorded online using Teams. The author interviewed one participant at home in London for 110 minutes, at his request. The Afghan journalist and former 'fixer' Akhtar Makoii transcribed the interviews and interviewed his own 'fixer', TF, in Dari. Interviewees were given the option of anonymity. Most wanted to go on the record, but it was

decided to make everyone anonymous, both to avoid difficulties with employers and guarantee the security of those in Afghanistan. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, read several times before coding and then examined using qualitative thematic analysis. The data was first analysed empathetically, from the participants' own perspective. Themes emerged inductively as participants described the ways in which they made sense of different aspects of their work and their relationships with foreign journalists and others. While continuing to prioritise the interviewees' own perspective, the author then evaluated the ways in which the participants talked about the themes they had identified as important.

Table 1.

Categories	Questions
Descriptive	• Describe the various jobs and roles you have played assisting foreign journalists in Afghanistan
Narrative	• How did you start working with foreign journalists? • Describe the security challenges. • Have you ever cleared up a foreign journalist's mess?
Structural	• How do you source stories for foreign reporters?
Evaluative	• What do you think of the title of 'fixer'? • How much freedom do you have when doing the work? • What benefits has 'fixing' brought you? • To what extent did foreign colleagues value your contribution? • Do you think you contribute to the editorial side? • Who looks after whom when doing this work? • How do you mitigate risks? • What do foreign journalists need to know to work better with Afghan colleagues? • Describe your ideal foreign journalist. • What have you learned from working with foreigners?

Findings

Group experiential theme 1. The participants talked about sub-contracting their newsgathering to their own fixer networks

Interviewees had their own paid and unpaid networks of helpful people in different parts of the country who could open doors to interviewees and stories, WhatsApp often being used for its encrypted messaging. These could be pre-existing work networks, tribal members in remote

villages or professional journalist networks. They described how the system worked. Foreign journalists arriving in Afghanistan to pursue a story invariably first turned to the English-speaking Kabul-based 'fixers'. Since the Kabul 'fixers' invariably came from the educated middle classes and had grown up in remote or conservative, closed communities in the provinces they often lacked the required local contacts. Yet Afghanistan was a huge country of 34 provinces, each area had distinct ethnic and tribal cultures, languages and accents and, therefore, different behaviour. Local journalists in the districts, by contrast, had the necessary contacts and access to officials, but poor to non-existent English. Therefore, to work effectively in the provinces, the research participants routinely hired local colleagues on the ground who had the local knowledge and local contacts to find interviewees for them and fix official permissions. In effect, the Kabul 'fixers' routinely found it expedient to sub-contract their newsgathering. One interviewee paid his local 'fixers' out of his own pocket. For 10 years he had worked at a news agency, 'fixing' stories for foreign journalists. Over that period, he had built up a large network of helpers with whom he kept in contact. Some were local journalists and others, friends and relatives.

> You have to have fixers who have [their own] fixers. It must be like that. I have one rule: to get the job done. In order to get a job done, you have to have fixers, and you have to pay them. They have to have fixers, and they have to pay them too. The problem is that the money goes narrower, but the job is getting done. FM

By contrast, LQ normally gave a foreign journalist employer two options. First, the foreigner could bring him all the way from Kabul to the province and pay him his normal rate for days worked and pay the local journalist separately. The second, cheaper, option was the foreign reporter could go alone to the location and the Kabul 'fixer' could stay at base remotely coordinating the work, so that the local journalist and the foreigner could do the story without him.

> It is a super-efficient way of working. When I first go to a province, I search for a local journalist. I make friends with him. We are both Afghans, and they are always friendly people. So, we get in touch. Next time I plan to go there, I contact them. And here's the point. I know that everyone needs money. The [economic] situation in Afghanistan is not good, so when a local journalist is helping me out of kindness, I should try to convince my client to pay him some money. It's important.
>
> Q. Is it a surprise to the foreign journalists that you're working like that?
>
> Not for some of them. Because they already know how things work. LQ

The same research participant said he was sometimes cut out of the story by the foreign journalist if his foreign client had someone on the

ground he had worked with before. The foreigners would return to Kabul with, he said, hundreds of complaints.

> Sometimes, they even get robbed by their 'fixers'. This has happened to a client of mine. They charge a huge amount, but most often they don't get the job done. No-one goes to one province all the time. So, the local people do not have this good opportunity of making good money. [Therefore], whenever they get one chance, they want to use it to the maximum. This has happened many times. LQ

Another described a similar case when two foreign journalists hoping to save money had hired a provincial 'fixer' in the Panjshir valley who unfortunately was unable to speak English apart from a couple of simple greetings. In the end they returned to Kabul without paying the 'fixer', because no one had been able to understand each other. Participants talked about this practice of sub-contracting their 'fixing' in terms which highlighted their agency and autonomy. Any kind of social or professional network could be used. One interviewee had been responsible for logistics at a foreign NGO before the Taliban takeover in 2021 and now working as a 'fixer' he was able to call on former colleagues all over the country. Another used his former university classmates as well as local journalists, now working all over Afghanistan, to assist him:

> As journalists, we all need to be well connected and have a wide range of contacts. I made many friends when we were in university. Most of my classmates are working in different provinces now. I just call them for help. We have a WhatsApp group with journalists from all over the country. We share what we need from that group. It's all local reporters. BY

FM talked about his use his own 'fixers' in terms of promoting an element of social justice, for example when redistributing the foreigner's budget to colleagues who were not working as much as they would like, or to a female relative who could access places men could not visit. Afghanistan was a poor country and there were plenty of people who could do with some extra cash.

> In a way, it's my responsibility to gather them and help them get some money for something that they do [for me] … It's crazy because I pay too much. There was a female colleague of mine who needed money. She just went a place for a half-an-hour interview where men were not allowed, and I paid her 100 dollars. I also paid my cousin 150 euros for just one phone call. FM

Interviewees stressed it was even more important to cultivate helpful people to work for them because it could not be assumed that journalists in the provinces would always aid the Kabul 'fixers'. QM said sometimes there could be competition between journalists on the ground. For example, if local journalists were required by their outlet to publish a story immediately on social media, offering to pay them for their services was of no use.

> Local journalists are not always receptive to foreign journalists. There can be a sense of competition and opposing interests between them. Foreign journalists aim to capture footage for international broadcasting, such as on BBC, while local journalists may focus on immediate local coverage, which they share through channels like YouTube or local news broadcasts during specific hours. This can lead to conflicts and tensions between the two groups. QM

TF identified himself as a 'fixer of a fixer'. He was living in Iran but had previously been based in Herat province where he was never employed directly by foreigners. Instead, he had been sub-contracted by different 'fixers' who were to find interviewees in remote locations. TF would ask elders from his tribe to vouch for the foreigners with officials whom the foreigner wanted to talk to. Otherwise, they might have been a spy. In such a case any distinction was fuzzy between those he talked to as a source, and others who worked in a more active way to contact others and do things for him.

> It was mostly finding contact numbers and sources for stories. I would not have those contact numbers and sources, but I would have relatives in those places they were looking. I would find a person who knew the guy that the 'fixer' and foreign reporter would be looking for. In one case, they were reporting about my district which was under siege for a long time before it fell to the Taliban. So, I only needed to call my relatives and ask them if they could find a person who is willing to talk over the phone. TF

TF had completed a journalism degree but had never worked as journalist since, he said, he had no interest in doing so. The initial attraction of working for 'fixers' was purely for the money, which was far more than his day job in construction. But after a while he became impressed with how much effort the foreigners were putting in to 'stand up' the stories they worked on.

> In a way I was doing third-class stuff, providing contacts to someone [the 'fixer'] who was doing second-class stuff, who was interviewing, writing and providing content to a foreign reporter – who was doing first-class things. … If we had a table showing a hierarchy [of newsgathering], the 'fixers' would be at the bottom, and then the foreign reporters would be at the top. I would not be on the list but would just be clinging to the table by my hands. And the people who were helping me would be clinging to my feet. TF

The interviewees' social and professional networks could thus all be exploited as part of their work routines.

Group experiential theme 2. Participants were upset when others regarded them as other than real journalists

It became apparent during the interviews that the research participants carried a great deal of emotional upset. One said foreigners rarely grasped that the whole population was suffering from PTSD after 45

years of war, yet in the course of their work, interviewees had covered the aftermath of suicide bombings and the funerals of victims, been shot, blown up, threatened, arbitrarily detained or tortured by Taliban officials. Some were on medication. A key theme which emerged from the interviews was how humiliating it was to be seen as someone other than a proper journalist not just by foreign journalists, but also fellow Afghans. Most of the interviewees greatly disliked being called a 'fixer' or translator preferring terms such as colleague, collaborator, producer, even local contributor because of this. A research participant who had observed foreign journalists close-up at expatriate parties in Kabul over the years said:

> They'll say: 'Where's your guy? Where's your Afghan guy?' I think it is very disrespectful. Somebody was a journalist, even if they don't call them a journalist.
>
> Q. How did you feel inside, emotionally?
>
> A. Very painful, for so many reasons. I feel … it's racism. Looking down on them. It's all about respect. If you don't respect somebody, you don't respect his work as well. EA

Also racist, said interviewees who had worked in the Kabul bureaux, was the casual assumption by expatriate journalists that they were entitled to use the services of any Afghan colleague interviewees as 'fixers' on their stories. Foreigners would routinely ask interviewees for their best story ideas, request they work them up for use later and then publish them under their byline. Other times the foreigner would ask, for example, FF, a staff reporter at a leading US newspaper, to drop whatever she was doing to work for them.

> They were not taking us seriously as a journalist or a person. … Some of them are nice, but some others, like Americans, are really good at ordering people around. They would say: 'Let's do it. We are going to this place. Get ready.' Also, it happened that you're going somewhere, but you have no idea where you're going because this person is too busy to even communicate [with you]. FF

But it was not only foreign journalists who failed to respect them as journalists. Interviewees pointed to the cultural taboos against working for foreigners. Their compatriots often made it clear they saw the locally hired reporters as spies, pimps, drug dealers or servants. One interviewee said Afghans were strongly xenophobic, meaning that proud Muslims did not work for foreigners and those who did were demeaning themselves.

> You're not supposed to serve foreigners in our culture. But when you work with them and then everyone else is looking at you like you are serving the foreign reporter … we've always been looked down upon as a servant. It's a kind of belief that when you are a tarjoman [translator], you are not a proud Afghan. US

In more conservative regions women were not allowed to meet anyone outside the family group and young women who were working for foreign journalists might be seen as prostitutes.

> There were some rumours, unfortunately, about some journalists who would take the interpreters into their rooms in the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul [a luxury hotel used by visiting journalists] and who were sexually exploiting some of these young translators. Because of these rumours, which were wrong in most cases probably, the idea of being called an interpreter was not good. US

Some high-level Afghan officials would insist local interviewees took their meals outside and away from them and the foreigners. Yet at other times, officials might extend a welcome to the whole team, giving the locally hired reporter a privileged place to sit, excellent food and treating him as a special guest. Another key theme of the research participants was when they felt harshly judged by their compatriots, they kept their upset hidden. QM would talk to his wife when he was upset:

> They don't see the value in what I do. I capture [material for] documentaries … to showcase how people survive and their needs to the rest of the world. In such circumstances, they should appreciate my work. Instead, they mock me and use derogatory terms like 'fixer', directing their insults towards me, an Afghan, rather than the foreign individuals. This deeply affects me emotionally. Afterward, I called my wife and spoke to her about what had happened. She reassured me, telling me not to worry and not to take it seriously. She reminded me that there are many foolish people in Afghanistan, and I should focus on the positive. I expressed my gratitude to her, saying: 'Thank you, baby.' QM

Discussion: On the agency and autonomy of locally hired reporters

The ways in which the interviewed locally hired reporters talked about sub-contracting their newsgathering to others tended to highlight their agency and autonomy, and how this aspect of role resembles that of the foreign correspondents who employ them. This way of working is routine within the global news industry. When the author was producing television news reports across Russia it was normal practice for his regular 'fixers', who were all based in Moscow, to locate a journalist in a regional news outlet who had all the necessary contacts to set up the story. Sometimes the Moscow 'fixer' travelled to the location, and on other occasions they ended up leaving the work to the regional journalist. In news, generally no access means no story and journalists do not mind much who secures it. 'Journalists see people mainly as potential sources,' wrote Gans (1979: 117).

The distinctions between who does what in news production are fuzzy. A large amount of what may traditionally be viewed as 'fixing'

is done by all parties in news production. The Channel 4 News foreign correspondent, Alex Thomson, describes his own job as '80 per cent logistics, 10 per cent luck and 10 per cent journalism' (Thomson 2022). Television, being the most labour-intensive news medium, has more production staff contributing invisible editorial work 'below the line' (Mayer 2013) but in foreign news the use of 'fixers' is ubiquitous regardless of which media is in question.

Conclusion

Previous research has examined the enormous range of editorial work done by locally hired reporters (Palmer 2019: 1-33). This study supports the view of 'fixers' that they have far more editorial influence on correspondents' reports than they are given credit for (Plaut and Klein 2019: 1708). The locally hired journalists in this study did want due credit, but on their own terms and it had to be safe for their name to be revealed. One had repeatedly asked his editors at a major US newspaper not to put his name on sensitive stories but after they did so he was shot at in the street, he believed, by Taliban intelligence agents.

The harsh judgements of other Afghans demonstrate why being a 'fixer' 'reporting global while being local' (Jukes 2019) can be so awkward. The findings suggest that the locally hired journalists tend to keep their upset hidden, and the causes for it come from how they fit into the global news setting and their role in the local culture. 'Fixing' always has a dualistic, double-sided character. Local journalists are hired precisely because they can operate in both the global and local news fields. Working within the field of anthropology, van Gennep coined the term liminality – from the word '*limen*,' meaning threshold (1977 [1909]: 11). It denotes the qualities attached to periods of transition in tribal society. 'Fixing' is a liminal, in-between activity. Turner called such social transitions 'a process, a becoming ... into a new achieved status' within the tribe (1974 [1967]: 94). In her book about emotional labour, *The managed heart*, Arlie Russell Hochschild writes:

> [T]he emotion work of enhancing the status and well-being of others is a form of what Ivan Illich has called 'shadow labour', an unseen effort, which like housework does not quite count as labour but is nevertheless crucial to getting other things done (2012: 167).

The cultural gaps between Afghans and foreigners may be bigger than in many other regions and some of the disapproval expressed by the interviewees' compatriots about working for foreigners may not be applicable to locally hired journalists who work in other settings. 'Fixing' comes with an emotional cost. Ashraf takes a Marxist view of the human cost of becoming an instrument of labour, arguing that the language of collaboration and teamwork often used by foreign journalists and scholars alike to describe news 'fixing' hides a set-up which is fundamentally extractive and exploitative (2022: 113-116). But the findings here support Kotišová and Deuze's view that such an approach is too simplistic. '[S]ome of the reviewed literature on fixers

[which] declares that seeing the various actors involved simply as either victim or an exploiter is both inaccurate and unethical,' they write (2022: 1171).

Limitations of the research

The emotional world of locally hired reporters is a huge subject into which this research makes only the smallest of inroads. A limitation of the study is that it was done remotely due to the difficulties of working in Afghanistan under the current Taliban government. Accordingly direct observation of how local journalists interact with foreign journalists and others was impossible.

References

Arjomand, Noah Amir (2022) *Fixing stories*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Ashraf, Irfan (2021) The fixer on the Pak-Afghan frontier: A de-skilled local labour in the global media, *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal*, Vol. 5 pp 1-16. Available online at https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/5.2.1, accessed on 9 September 2024

Ashraf, Irfan (2022) *The dark side of news fixing: The culture and political economy of global media in Pakistan and Afghanistan*, London, Anthem

Bishara, Amahl (2006) Local hands, international news: Palestinian journalists and the international media, *Ethnography,* Vol. 7 No. 1 pp 19-46. Available online at https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138106064590, accessed on 9 September 2024

Borpujari, Priyanka (2019) The problem with 'fixers', *Columbia Journalism Review*. Available online at https://www.cjr.org/special_report/fixers.php, accessed on 9 September 2024

Bowen, Jeremy (2007) *War stories*, London, Pocket Books

Etough, Virginia and Smith, Jonathan (2008) Interpretative phenomenological analysis, Willig, Carla and Stainton-Rogers, Wendy (eds) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, London, Sage pp 179-194

Filer, Shaun (2010) Responsible media: Learning to survive the world's difficult, remote and hostile environments, *Pacific Journalism Review,* Vol. 16, No. 1 pp 125-132. Available online at https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/informit.410820731914814, accessed on 9 September 2024

Fishman, M. (1980) *Manufacturing the news*, Austin, University of Texas Press

Gans, Herbert J. (1979) *Deciding what's news: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time,* New York, Pantheon Books

Gennep, Arnold V. (1977 [1909]) *The rites of passage*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul

Guest, Ken (2010) Dynamic interplay between religion and armed conflict in Afghanistan, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 92 No. 880 pp 877-897. Available online at https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-880-guest.pdf, accessed on 9 September 2024

Hochschild, Arlie Russell (2012) *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*, Berkeley, University of California Press

Jukes, Stephen (2019) Reporting global while being local: Commentary for special issue, *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 12 pp 1798-1802. Available online at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1636706, accessed on 9 September 2024

paper

Kotišová, Johana and Deuze, Mark (2022) Decolonizing conflict journalism studies: A critical review of research on fixers, *Journalism Studies,* Vol. 23, No. 10 pp 1160-1177. Available online at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2022.2074871, accessed on 9 September 2024

Luft, Oliver (2008) International: BBC is unfair to freelancers in conflict zones, says cameraman, *Guardian*, 14 November. Available online at https://www.theguardian.com/media/2008/nov/14/bbc-tvnews, accessed on 9 September 2024

Mayer, Vicki (2013) *Below the line*, Durham, Duke University Press

Murrell, Colleen (2010) Baghdad bureaux: An exploration of the interconnected world of fixers and correspondents at the BBC and CNN, *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 3, No. 2 pp 125-137. Available online at http://mwc.sagepub.com/content/3/2/125.abstract, accessed on 9 September 2024

Murrell, Colleen (2013) International fixers: Cultural interpreters or 'people like us'? *Ethical Space*, Vol. 10 No. 2/3 pp 72-79

Murrell, Colleen (2014). The Vulture Club: International newsgathering via Facebook, *Australian Journalism Review*, Vol. 36 No. 1 pp 15-27. Available online at https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/ielapa.502801913037134, accessed on 9 September 2024

Murrell, Colleen (2015) *Foreign correspondents and international newsgathering: The role of fixers*, London, Routledge

Murrell, Colleen (2019) Fixers as entrepreneurs, *Journalism Studies,* Vol. 20, No.12 pp 1679-1695. Available online at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1636705, accessed on 9 September 2024

New York Times (2009) Colleagues remember Sultan Munadi, 9 September. Available online at https://archive.nytimes.com/atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/09/colleagues-remember-sultan-munadi/

O'Donnell, Lynne (2022) The Taliban detained me for doing my job. I can never go back, *Foreign Policy*, 20 July. Available online at https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/20/taliban-afghanistan-media-crackdown-journalism-detained/, accessed on 9 September 2024

Olds, Ian (2009) Fixer: The taking of Ajmal Naqshbandi. Available online at https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1372256/, accessed on 9 September 2024

Packer, George (2009) It's always the fixer who dies, *New Yorker*, 10 September. Available online at https://www.newyorker.com/news/george-packer/its-always-the-fixer-who-dies, accessed on 9 September 2024

Palmer, Jerry and Fontan, Victoria (2007) 'Our ears and our eyes': Journalists and fixers in Iraq, *Journalism*, Vol. 8, No. 1 pp 5-24. Available online at https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884907072419, accessed on 9 September 2024

Palmer, Lindsay (2019) *The fixers: Local news workers' perspectives on international reporting*, New York, Oxford University Press

Pedelty, Mark (2013) *War stories: The culture of foreign correspondents*, London, Routledge

Plaut, Shayna and Klein, Peter (2019) The practice of fixing and the role of fixers in global journalism, *Oxford research encyclopaedia of communication*, Oxford, Oxford University Press. Available online at https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.813, accessed on 9 September 2024

Rory Peck Trust (n.d.) Trauma fund for Afghan journalists. Available online at https://rorypecktrust.org/how-we-help/trauma-fund-for-afghan-journalists/, accessed on 9 September 2024

Seo, Soomin (2016) Marginal majority at the postcolonial news agency: Foreign journalistic hires at the Associated Press, *Journalism Studies, Vol.* 17, No. 1 pp 39-56. Available online at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2014.954891, accessed on 9 September 2024

Sigal, L.V. (1973) *Reporters and officials: The organization and politics of newsmaking*, Lexington, D.C. Heath

Smith, Jonathan A. (2004) Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* Vol. 1, No. 1 pp 39-54. Available online at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1191/1478088704qp004oa, accessed on 9 September 2024

Smith, Jonathan A., Flowers, Paul and Larkin, Michael (2021) Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, London, SAGE Publications pp 1-100. Available online at https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/121710_book_item_121710.pdf

Thomson, Alex (2022) Channel 4 News' Alex Thomson on how new war reporting challenges combined with timeless dilemmas in Ukraine, *Press Gazette*, 7 October. Available online at https://pressgazette.co.uk/comment-analysis/alex-thomson-ukraine-channel-4-news/, accessed on 9 September 2024

Tuchman, G. (1972) Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 77, No. 4 pp 660-679

Turner, Victor (1974 [1967]) *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*, London, Cornell University Press

Williams, Kevin (2011) *International journalism*, London, Sage

Zelizer, Barbie (2004) *Taking journalism seriously: News and the academy*, London, Sage

paper

Conflict of interest

This research was funded by the British Institute for Persian Studies. There was no conflict of interest.

Note on the contributor

Dr Richard Pendry teaches classes in war reporting and propaganda at the University of Kent Centre for Journalism. He was a member of the specialist conflict agency Frontline News Television and produced TV news from Chechnya, Afghanistan and the Congo. As a documentary film maker, he specialises in investigations with difficult access, has worked with presenters including Ross Kemp and often does his own camerawork.