

Altaf Khan

## Fixers in corporate media: Pashtun journalists under threat in North Western Pakistan

*Kurzfassung:* Lokale Fixer werden für die internationalen Medien aufgrund zunehmender Bedrohung der Sicherheit internationaler Journalisten, Haushaltskürzungen in den internationalen Medienorganisationen und dem Verschwinden des Langzeit-Korrespondenten immer wichtiger. Lokale Fixer verleihen Nachrichtengeschichten lokales Flair und Kontext. Obwohl ihre Arbeit in Konfliktregionen äußerst gefährlich ist, stehen die Fixer in der internationalen Korrespondentenhierarchie ganz unten. Der vorliegende Aufsatz untersucht die aus ihrer Perspektive bestehende Situation mittels qualitativer Tiefeninterviews, die im Nordwesten Pakistans durchgeführt wurden. Gestützt auf die Theorien von Edward Said und Antonio Gramsci stellt er die Probleme der Fixer in den größeren Zusammenhang postkolonialer Beziehungen und diskutiert die Rolle westlicher internationaler Journalisten im kulturellen Kontext der Hegemonie.

*Abstract:* Local fixers are becoming increasingly important for international media due to escalating security threats to international journalists, budget cuts within international media organizations, and the disappearance of long-stay correspondents. Local fixers give local color and context to news stories, but their work in conflict regions is extremely dangerous. Making things worse, fixers are at the bottom of the international correspondence totem pole. This paper approaches the situation from the perspective of fixers using qualitative in-depth interviews made in northwestern Pakistan, whereby we see fixers' problems in a wider context of post-colonial relationships. The role of Western international journalists is discussed within a cultural context of hegemony, primarily drawing on theories of Edward Said and Antonio Gramsci.

### 1. Introduction

International reporting has changed its structure so much that we may soon be nearing the demise of international correspondence as we know it. There are several reasons for this structural change, including financial, political, and logistical ones. Modern technology has replaced the long-stay correspondent with "parachute" journalists. This is believed to have affected the empathy levels of foreign journalists in a negative manner. As financial constraints have forced news organizations to shut down many of their overseas operations, the rise of technology and the ensuing spread of internet and social media use have posed new challenges for international correspondence. These developments have changed the nature of journalistic storytelling, in terms of both information collection and narration.

The local journalist has also been seriously affected by all these developments. Those working in zones of conflict have been more exposed to the dangers of retaliation due the rise of awareness among parties in conflict, on the one hand, and the demands of Western media organizations for more audio-visual details, on the other. At the same time, these journalists are being asked to create more novel content, due to the rise of citizen journalism and increasing competition for traditional media structures. These changes affect all journalists irrespective of their positions in the media hierarchy, but those at the lowest levels of the structure are definitely getting the worst of the deal. These are the ones known as 'fixers' in professional parlance. Fixers are reporters from within conflict zones who have the job of providing raw material for stories to be published in Western media. This report explains the perspectives of journalists working for international media in the conflict zones of north-western Pakistan, Kyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP) bordering Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The idea for this paper originated from a four-week course entitled "Journalism in Zones of Conflict", in which students from the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication (JMC) at the University of Peshawar and from RMIT University in Australia participated in a collaborative virtual classroom.<sup>1</sup> The first contingent of students included working journalists from KP and FATA<sup>2</sup>. This paper is based on in-depth interviews with journalists in Peshawar who have had experience working as fixers for international media. The interviews were made during spring and summer 2018. The interviewed journalists were either graduates of JMC or they had received some training there. The aim of the interviews was to gain knowledge of the journalists' experiences and working conditions while reporting for international media.

The theoretical considerations of the research are based on discussions of the asymmetrical relationships between post-colonial societies and former colonizers, drawing inspiration from Noam Chomsky's analysis of

<sup>1</sup> <https://lagunita.stanford.edu/courses/course-v1:Education+VSE102+ongoing/about>

<sup>2</sup> The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were merged into the province of KP in 2018.

Western capitalism (Chomsky 2002 and 2013).<sup>3</sup> The work of Edward Said (1997 and 2001) provides the basic premises of the study, but theories of power relations are also important here.

## 2. Context: the Fixers' World

The journalistic system and connected news production processes have long been subjected to harsh criticism. Imbalance in the flow of information and cultural hegemony are two main areas of critique that directly point to political interest-based, Western-biased representations in global news structures. The system has, however, been analyzed from a holistic perspective and much less from an individual, human perspective. International correspondence is a process where international correspondents operate. There are well-known correspondents and others working in relative obscurity. The celebrities of international journalism, international correspondents, are known everywhere, but there is another group of individuals whom nobody knows outside their immediate life circle: the fixers.

The fixer is the local man or woman on the ground who secures that critical interview, gets access to that all-important location, who reads between the lines when the situation is rife with local complexity (Yong, 2018).

This is the "age of the death of international correspondence", announced Kevin Williams in a widely read book (Williams, 2011, p. 168). International correspondence is being transformed by many factors. Financial and budgetary constraints in the media industry are one. Another is the change of focus after the end of the Cold War. Global alliances have changed their patterns, and like small businesses in villages, great powers are trying to cut costs and set new rules of engagement in international partnerships. The rise of new power centers after the dormant 1990s, when the US remained the lone superpower, has changed the international political and ideological demography. "The foreign correspondent, a type incomparably satirized by Evelyn Waugh in his novel *Scoop*, and celebrated by Alfred Hitchcock in his film *Foreign Correspondent*, is an endangered species. Only a few major news organizations, such as the BBC and the *New York Times*, still have worldwide networks of resident correspondents, in what are traditionally called foreign bureaux (or bureaus, according to taste)" (Ash, 2010).

The fixers are known as the "unsung heroes of global journalism" (Yong, 2018), because of their anonymity in the system of international correspondence. This anonymity doesn't simply have financial or status implications for these local journalists, it also has a deeper international impact. They become part of a system of news production where they don't have any control over the process of reporting news about their own communities. Nor is their opinion asked regarding the structure of a news story. This, in effect, could be seen as nothing short of symbolic annihilation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Lobo & Cabecinhas, 2010) of the communities. Since they have an identity of "organic intellectuals" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5), representing a people, their inability to further the cause of their respective communities drives them into alienation, a loss of respect that entails alienation within their own immediate environments. To the international media, fixers are simply day laborers, paid either per piece (article) or per day (for data collected for an international correspondent's story). The problem with this distant relationship from the sources of the news production process is that no cultural empathy is possible between media decision-makers and fixers.

## 3. Intercultural Contexts of Fixers' Working Conditions

The roots of this indifference to local narratives in international correspondence could easily be seen as the agenda of international media, which is Western-centric. But the problems and identity crises this creates have deeper roots. These roots are not restricted to journalism alone. They lie in the very nature of an age-old relationship between the dominant West and the colonized East. Post-colonial bias has been discussed by many writers and academics. Edward Said's approach to Orientalism is a useful perspective to understand deeper reasons behind Western media insistence on the Anglo-American model of journalism, emphasizing a Western-centric idea of objectivity.

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 2001, 11).

Still today, some academic writers question the orthodoxy of giving Western colonialism a "bad name". In a 2017 article by Bruce Gilley entitled *The Case for Colonialism*, the author argues that Western colonialism was, as a general rule, both objectively beneficial and subjectively legitimate in most of the places where it was established,

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<sup>3</sup> Chomsky's ideas extend beyond these books, and his enormous contributions go much farther. Lectures, articles, and intellectual movements inspired by him and his colleagues have greatly shaped our intellectual horizons.

using realistic measures of those concepts (Gilley, 2017). Gilley further argues in favor of the importance of the colonial heritage:

The countries that embraced their colonial inheritance, by and large, did better than those that spurned it. Anti-colonial ideology imposed grave harms on subject peoples and continues to thwart sustained development and a fruitful encounter with modernity in many places.

And finally, he confirms the imperativeness of the colonial legacy by giving the recipe for development, saying, "Colonialism can be recovered by weak and fragile states today in three ways: by reclaiming colonial modes of governance; by recolonising some areas; and by creating new Western colonies from scratch (ibid.)". Following a number of complaints, the article was eventually withdrawn from *Third World Quarterly*, but the point was already made and the colonial bias given fresh academic affirmation.

Orientalism also ensures a storytelling style focused on the needs of Western audiences, the local audiences of the Western journalist (Hachten & Scotton, 2015). Recent research suggests that news outlets are responsive to the preferences of their audiences, which want like-minded news reporting. Deeply embedded incentive structures, often operating almost unconsciously, influence how reporters and editors anticipate the demands of their audiences and the marketplace (Burman, 2011; Whiby; 2015). International correspondents and correspondence itself are foreign policy partners of governments (Williams, 2011). Since Western nations dominate the world, the Anglo-American model of journalism has been granted the position of authority and definitive decision-making. Entering the realm of international journalism demands an understanding of, and a submission to, this model. A good journalist is supposed to know the "objective" way of storytelling. And objectivity is always decided on the basis of the Western model of objectivity and professionalism (Williams, 2011).

In the early days of international correspondence, professional journalists dedicated their lives to acquiring a native sense of the culture, language, and other social elements of places where they resided. Those were the days of long-stay correspondents. The BBC's Mark Tully<sup>4</sup> was a classic example. Before this was the era of war correspondents. These were more or less the same as our present-day embedded journalists. Traveling with colonial troops into what were known as barbarian enemy territories provided a sense of mystery that embedded journalists enjoyed, but it was not objective journalism. How could one find the truth while strongly immersed in colonial military camps?

The idea of colonialism was based on feelings of foreignness taken as the last defense of humanity within a desert of barbarity and inhumanity. With its sense of patriotism and loyalty to empire, colonialism remained a salient trait of journalism during those romantic days (Beuscher, 1996). Churchill's account of his encounter with the Pashtoons offers a picture of the native people that is anything but empathetic. He considered it right to burn down Mohmand villages, because these "very cruel people" did "need a lesson" (Coughlin, 2013). His commitment to empire, as well as his sympathy for the Her Majesty's Soldiers is evident in his advice to readers "to obtain a clear idea of a soldier's life on active service, they must mentally share the fatigue of the march and the monotony of the camp" (Coughlin, 2013).

Keeping this colonial context in mind, I would argue that international correspondence and correspondents are not simply working in a demand-supply context. There are rather deep-rooted cultural contexts that help in developing rituals of international correspondence, that rule the matrix of international journalism.

#### **4. Hegemony in the Context of a Post-Colonial legacy**

The "death of international correspondence" is also a "death of the distance" (Williams, 2011). Conflict-ridden regions of the world have also become difficult zones for Western journalists to operate in. The new international journalism is aided by the death of distance, antagonistic military strategies that include embedded correspondence as a necessary ingredient, and the parachute journalism that lets internationals stay home most of the time and dive in only when there is urgent need. These professionals are naturally looking for big stories, stories with sensational content, and what could be more sensational than death and destruction? This has changed the very ethical construct of international correspondence. Unfortunately, in most cases it has become a routine where packs of Western journalists enjoy the security of their respective forces in zones of conflict, getting information from different forces and discussing this within small circles, during evenings spent in safe places. There are no more scoops, and the issue is not exclusivity or novelty. It is about sharing information and looking for newer, bloodier regions of conflict when events become boring in any one place. Pack journalism

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<sup>4</sup> Sir William Mark Tully, Born in 1935 in India, joined the BBC in 1964. He resigned from the BBC in 1994. He was the author of the famous book *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle*, which shows the broad scope of his understanding of Indian culture. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark\\_Tully](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Tully)  
He is one of the major examples of long stay correspondents for whom the term "going native" has been coined.

necessitates a first world fraternity, predominantly Western, where decisions are made through closed group dynamics, and journalists decide to move from one area to another in flocks (Williams, 2011, 115).

If we examine the problem in greater detail, it goes beyond routines and technological developments. It has the same flavor as Churchill's loyalty to the British empire. In fact, it somehow builds on the sense of superiority the West feels toward the East. This is a routine rooted in colonial, post-colonial bias. International correspondence is already heavily laden with a colonial legacy. There is a great deal of displeasure with the representation of the subject states, the post-colonial societies and zones of conflict in the developing world.

In questioning the growing hegemony of the Anglo-American model of journalism, new forms and practices of journalism have been articulated (Williams, 2011).

But the roots of all this extend deeper into the cultural fabric. The West sees the East, the Orient, as monolithic. It is easier to generalize the misery of the Orient and then depart on a mission to rectify things. This messianic approach, as Said puts it, could be seen even in the analysis of the most humane Western observers of the Orient. Intellectuals like Karl Marx were not immune from this malaise (Said, 2001). The process of meaning making and controlling discourse patterns is at the roots of the international system of journalism, known as international correspondence.

Such an activity takes place perforce in a specific time and place and is engaged in by a specifically located individual, with a specific background, in a particular situation, for a particular series of ends (Said, 2001).

The goal, in Said's view, is to make "another country" out of a real place (Said, 1997; p. 123). Journalists create an image of a country according to the Western audience's preferences or the West's prejudices. They leave many questions unanswered, ignoring them to satisfy the interests of their government or the cultural biases they are born with. At times, it is simply in the interest of the herd, the group of Western journalists, to work in packs. They decide when to move to greener pastures, finding events about which they can publish more easily. They know that their audience in the West has a habit of losing interest in repetitive conflict coverage. So to keep interest alive, they move on to other places. Since a complete story is never told, the audience in the West remains largely addicted to a myth rather than to any reality. The fervor to serve their own audience is easily transformed into nationalism and cultural hegemonic trends. Like the young Churchill in his day, they consider it crucial that their image of reality should be accepted as authentic. Even when there is disagreement within the dominant West, a different opinion is regarded as an "alternative" (Said, 1997, p. 127) account of reality, confirming the veracity of the original narrative. Western newspapers (or other media outlets) are not simply newspapers, but are journals of "record", viewing themselves as representing the world in accordance with specific conceptions of what their (country's) interests are (Said, 1997, p. 127). The issue of slanting news becomes a missionary enterprise instead of a professional fulfillment of journalistic duty.

This is an image of the Western journalist's mindset while covering conflict zones. The question that arises in this context and that needs an answer is: Why do local fixers agree to this distorted view of their own self, while representing the world around them from a Western perspective?

The simplest explanation could be financial benefits and the gain in status by being part of larger, more important media structures. The psychology of status is at work. But the issue is not so simple. The current of Western views of the Orient (or the East) does not find easy acceptance in the non-Western world. The difficulty in understanding Western curiosity through a specific lens is still seen as suspect in these countries (Said, 1997, p. 138). And since journalists are considered part of the organic intelligentsia, one cannot accept the mistaken notion that their adoption of the Western view of their homelands is innocently voluntary. Rather, again according to Said, Western journalists are well aware of the "dangers of selfish interest followed in the name of patriotism, chauvinism, ethnic, religious, and racial hatred" (1994, p. 21). But this very awareness should not lure us into accepting the myth of a harmonious world, even on the intellectual plane. Said warns us against any such misconception, calling it "disingenuous to suppose that ideas of peace and community have much of a chance when power is moved to action by aggressive perceptions of 'vital national interests' or unlimited sovereignty" (Said, 1994, p. 21). Although all this happens within a biased representation, fixers are not simpletons. They often constitute the very core of a society's intelligentsia. Why do they then so uncritically submit to the expectations of Western counterparts? Journalists in crisis zones accept the views of the Western media and are in the habit of defending them within their own countries. The process of this acceptance occurs on a cultural level and is a manifestation of cultural hegemony that reveals itself in the form of media hegemony. The local journalist, instead of becoming counter-hegemonic, remains within the frame of the global media structure. A counter-hegemonic voice of the *South*, as some would like to call it, is not possible, since the whole matrix of expression and arguments that forms the basis of discourse is rooted in the hegemonic paradigm (Painter, 2008). According to Gramsci, the "West" has dominated cultural patterns in the "East" since the rise and consolidation of European civilization (1971, p. 447). Not only has it "crystallized" itself as a cultural monolith, but it has also gotten Western values "accepted worldwide" due to its "worldwide hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 447). Despite its rather obscure rise in the idea of East and West, the West's cultural dominance has not remained an intellectual construct, but has trickled into the cultural formats of societies (Gramsci, 1971, p. 417). Within this

structure powerful nations force weaker ones to accept and perform actions they would not choose if they were not under hegemonic influence:

societies under the domination of an alien and stronger culture have usually been compelled, by force or otherwise, to learn the language and to try to understand the ways of those who dominate them (Said, 1997, p. 137).

It is within this context that we see a fixer as a person who collects information for a Western counterpart to satisfy the latter's preferences, because the latter represents an audience that pays the bills. Stringers work hard to do their job to their patrons' satisfaction under this tacit understanding. They need money *and* an identity. To get both, or a bit of one or the other, they put themselves in difficult situations. The problem with the capitalist, corporate argument is that Western journalists are well compensated and have good insurance coverage. Stringers are not given any of these benefits.

## 5. Killing Fields: Information Regime in North-Western Pakistan

Over the last couple of years, Western journalists' access to conflict zones has been restricted. Governments in conflict regions like Pakistan do not give Western journalists free and easy access to conflict ridden areas. Obtaining a "No Objection Certificate" (NOC) has become mandatory for all Western journalists working in Pakistan. The new information regime has made it difficult for Western journalists to get first-hand accounts of events.

The new information regime has added to local fixers' workloads, making it very difficult for them to gather all the information Western journalists demand. On one hand, Western media demand the same sensationalism as ever, while on the other, chances of finding such news are steadily diminishing. Some fixers complain about their Western counterparts' attitude, but none dare to speak out openly, because they could lose their jobs. For fixers, it is a no-win situation, because they are local persons spending their lives and existences within zones of conflict. Even if they don't provide news, to avoid the wrath of conflict parties, international media may develop a narrative that is dangerous for the life and security of local journalists in the field. Should these journalists try to explain to the conflict parties that they did not break the story, extremists would never listen to them. Most of the time the extremist and information control structures (the state and the civil and military bureaucracy) know the truth, but they decide to punish the individual (or individuals) to send a strong message to media organizations in the West. Punishment takes different forms: It could be as minor as a warning, e.g., losing a job, or as extreme as killing a single fixer or even a whole family.<sup>5</sup> A fatal result of this inability to have any say in the news process shows itself in the displeasure of the parties to the conflict, one of the most dangerous conflicts in any functioning state (Khan, 2011b). Many Pakistani journalists have been killed merely for contributing stories to international media.<sup>6</sup> Some, or even many of them, declined to provide information that was dangerous for their survival in zones of conflict. Yet their respective international media organizations decided to use other sources from outside conflict zones and tell the whole story in detail. In one case, a journalist hailed from the very zone of conflict and lived there, becoming a target, a casualty of gross negligence by his parent organization. Such practices cannot be defended in the name of journalistic professionalism.

The difference views of 'objective journalism' are problematic for journalistic capacity in zones of conflict, where local journalists are not well trained to operationalize the concept. But the misunderstanding is not one-sided. While the Pakistani journalist might not be well equipped, the Western counterparts and their organizations never had a good grasp of the situation on the ground. Pakistan, being one of these extremely conflict-ridden areas, both from within and without, is a place where death looms large in a financially precarious life world of journalistic professionals.

This situation exposes these journalists to grave physical danger. Surviving local and global danger in a tightly controlled workplace and larger environment is not easy. Local journalists covering global issues by working with international media organizations decide to accept the risk to life and limb by associating themselves with values not compatible with the ruling ideas in their home country.

## 6. Operational problems and their possible solutions

The role of international correspondent has become more important than ever. The number of men and women representing international media organizations is on the rise. Almost all of them operate in zones of conflict

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<sup>5</sup> The above discussion is based on interviews and group discussions with many journalists, both male and female, in Peshawar. These include journalists from FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. None of them wishes to be named, for two obvious reasons. First, fear to get into harms way in Pakistan, and second, fear to lose their jobs as stringers because, in their opinion, Western media organizations do not tolerate criticism.

<sup>6</sup> The death of Voice of America Journalist Muhammad Atif in 2016 is one of many tragic events occurring in the line of duty <https://www.insidevoa.com/a/voa-reporter-killed-in-pakistan-----137499668/178566.html>

where they face threats to life and family. The rise of international conflicts and global involvement in them has increased the need for information enormously. The world is being interpreted, made and remade, through the media image of the whole planet and its different parts. The unintended, unplanned spread of news, even from within local Western media, has made journalism one of the main decision-making factors within world politics and international relations. As Mowlana put it succinctly, "information infrastructure and the information society are a part of every major global agenda" (2016, p. 85). Due to this rise in new power dynamics, the most important question is "whose interests are served by the new infrastructure and environment of international communication?" (2016, p. 86). The communication structures that also serve the system of journalism are instruments of control because the developed Western powers' "use of communication technologies increased the global power of the industrial countries, especially to maintain colonies and empires. Industrialization, combined with communication institutions, resulted in Western influence over Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America" (Mowlana, 2016, p. 86). Within this powerful structure of news gathering, biased presentation, and global policy influence, the fixer is nowhere visible. The number of fixers is on the rise in international correspondence, but their role is diminishing. This professional group is the most neglected segment of international journalism. They are low paid, work at higher risk, are never consulted about themes and topics, let alone the main contours of the story, and also never recognized with a byline, but face all the consequences of the international story published within local crisis-ridden frameworks. This is a perfect recipe for trauma (Khan, 2011).

The international journalists' fraternity never took off in Pakistan over the last 40 years during the Afghan war and the aftermath of 9/11. Internal conflict, terrorism in Pakistan, and the war on terror likewise had no impact on the relationship between well-known, high-salary Western journalists and their anonymous, tyrannized, underpaid Pakistani counterparts. In the news gathering business, the fixers' role is becoming increasingly important, but recognition eludes them more with every passing day. The war within has taken the luxury of first-hand inquiry away from Western journalists. They are becoming increasingly dependent on local fixers to get the story. Their sources are dwindling, because of restrictions imposed on them by governments, theirs and the Pakistani. In turn, they receive only an elitist version, mostly from Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, their own embassies, with which they need to remain in constant touch for obvious security reasons. Going "off base" is no longer an option, especially after the brutal murder of Daniel Pearl (Foundation, 2014).

Pack journalism is likewise impossible, since the number of foreigners staying in Pakistan is decreasing. Journalists do not like to sit around and be on someone else's watch before they can move. Once frustrated by tough, regimented routines, they either prefer to look for greener pastures elsewhere, or keep on parachuting, or both. Staying in Pakistan is not easy. It is a settled country, no place to be in a state of war where one could look for one's own forces to get 'embedded' in. Nothing doing! One has to face a highly organized bureaucracy that makes life very difficult. One has little time and lots of hurdles to cross. The stress of losing time in bureaucratic procedures kills enthusiasm for the scoop. So, even short-stay correspondents are not interested, let alone idolized long-stay legends. No expertise can be developed, because one never intends to stay long. The number of languages to learn and the cultural nuances to master is daunting, keeping in mind great hostility facing journalists in the field.

But the story is important. One needs to get it. And get it with exclusivity to justify the resources invested. This exclusivity becomes a problem in the overall situation. The fixer thus becomes more important than ever. Fixers are expected to literally craft the story out in the field. Given a list of complex questions to answer for a paycheck that can only be had when all blanks are filled in, the fixer's job is not just difficult, it is dangerous. He is a local in the killing fields, where the enemy is well disguised, blending into the scenery, one of their own kind, native sons all, and thus information collection is a very dangerous business.

"We are given a list to complete with the places to go and the persons to interview. This is dangerous. Even if we tell them that certain tasks are impossible, they would not listen. Since the payment is tied to the deliverables, and we are in need of money, we strive hard to get complete information," said one young journalist while talking about the difficult life of a stringer (Interviewed fixer, 2017).

People living in conflict zones are not considered rational enough to decide on the angle and structure of reportage. Anglo-American standards are also another big problem. The importance of Western languages, especially English in Pakistan, also limits a journalist's access to information and capacity to use it. Inability to express oneself in English is taken as further proof that fixers do not merit any compensation. Low wages and non-accreditation as an international journalist stem from the same bias against locals.

The fixer's status in the structure of international media is a great problem. Fixers are not big earners in their own country. In Pakistan most men and women, predominantly young, take a fixer job to earn some outside income to complement their very low wages from media jobs. They cannot depend on fixer assignments as a source of income, because this group of professionals doesn't have recognition as international correspondents. Most of their international parent organizations don't consider them permanent employees. They are just part-time helpers who fill in when Western reporters are unavailable. The problem with working for international

organizations is that local audiences expect suitable representations of local issues, or at least a clear perspective on local life in general. This goes beyond the stringer's payroll. They are simply providers of raw data, but are never in any way influential in developing story lines. Besides the imminent threat to life and security there is the problem of losing local audiences. Unfortunately, media organizations don't see that the communication revolution they are banking on is a misunderstood global phenomenon. True, it gives power to entrenched Western media elites, because they control technology and innovation. And "the so-called *communication* revolution has meant the spread of technology and systems innovation, and increased speed and quantity of messages" (ibid.).

But this is not how the power dynamics are evolving. They are no longer centralized. Neo-liberal economies are not simply concentrations of power in the hands of existing power elites; they are also taking it away from entrenched power structures based on nationalism. And this space is being filled, or rather reinvented, in a new mode. Based on the new power dynamics, communication being one of the central elements, "the real revolution is seen in a quest for satisfactory human communication, rather than a *communications* revolution viewed through the lens of technological and institutional spread and growth. This new revolution shares an alternative vision of human and societal development. It seeks dignity through dialogue" (ibid.). By denying fixers chances to contribute, international media are putting their own narrative at risk. Not just the fixer's reputation is at risk, but also the credibility of vast global news and information networks.

## 6.1 Finding Solutions

The challenge is not one of redefining journalism; rather there is a fresh approach to understanding the world through the prism of news. This involves freedom, transparency, and strong commitment to human causes (Krach, 2016). Krach has proposed a new role for journalism, and is not concerned with objectivity in the narrowest sense of the word. Instead, he calls for an international investigative journalism that doesn't recognize national borders, while serving humanity. His proposal is based on the reality of a globalized world where the flow of money, mostly illegal, doesn't recognize boundaries. To save humanity from hunger and poverty, Krach is calling for a new international journalism, where the fraternity of international correspondents engages in a new knowledge creation process that empowers people around the globe.

The problem of access and long stay correspondents is being transformed by the "death of distance", the revolution in technology and global travel networking (Williams, 2011). This has created a new breed of parachute journalists who dive into an area of conflict as 'experts' and use this platform to narrate happenings as foreign news for a domestic audience (Williams, 2011, p. 139). This change raises a few important questions. First, who can fill the gap left by the long stay correspondent? The local fixer is the answer. The fixers "tell you what hostile situations you can face. Where are the dangers? They understand the language, so if there is a crowd and the crowd becomes sort of aggressive or there's tension in the air, the fixer will know when it is time to pull out" (Yong, 2018). But the very use of the term fixer shows that the role is anything but decisive. The term signifies the fact that these professionals don't develop the idea of a story, nor do they work independently. They rather follow guidelines set by the 'expert', who might occasionally come to the area and give instructions to the fixer on how to "fix" things according to the visions of network owners, represented by the foreign, Western journalist (Khan, 2011).

Secondly, are parachute journalists, so-called experts, a substitute for the legendary long stay correspondent? Most certainly not! The long stay correspondent had a sense of culture. Their sources were not simply sources, they represented cultural values. They were a bridge between East and West. It was a continuous process of learning and unlearning that gave international correspondence the respect it still enjoys. Parachute correspondents, in contrast, are in a "mission mode". They come in burdened with preconceptions and try to appropriate real life situations within a prefabricated frame (Williams, 2011). Their cultural apathy directly affects the cultural potential of the job they do. The problem of not understanding local languages and cultural nuances has exacerbated the loss of credibility and reliable image of the profession. The key issue is that loss of news value is not being debated in the proper forums. Journalists and fixers do have debates within their internal groups, as Yong and Rrahmani put it, "But it's not a conversation that's been taking place between journalists and fixers, nor between those who are producing the news and those who are consuming the news" (2018). This situation, the bias laden, neo-colonial narrative, is confusing the very process of news as something self-evident and limited to a team of news anchor and big name reporter. The corresponding process of news making is invisible, and it seems that "news is just magically appearing" (Yong and Rrahmani, 2018). But despite the obliviousness of Western media structures, fixers have been complaining for many years:

They buy our services for a few dollars and then sell the stories for tens of thousands. This is not fair. We are the ones who make the stories. They don't even know the language, the culture, nothing. They can't even know a bit about anything, if we are not there to help them (Khan, 2011).

## 6.2 Is There a Silver Lining?

Meanwhile there are potential benefits in this whole complexity. The rise of local international correspondents in zones of conflict could create opportunities to tell the story from a local perspective. There can be collaboration among international reporters representing the dominant West, the narrative builders and discourse managers, on the one hand, and international correspondents within conflict zones presenting on-the-spot, local, personalized, human reportage. This could create a glocal story. Global in the sense of being fashioned in the dominant West's style of investigation and presentation, while at the same time local in terms of getting a real-life, on-the-ground, unvarnished view from within the field of inquiry. This is, despite its challenges, an ideal arrangement, a goal worthy to strive for.

The global revolution in information technology has transformed the world into a global village, almost in the literal sense of the word. People around the world are becoming increasingly aware through social media and the Internet. Audiences, more than journalists, are getting more and more critical of local representations of different nations and people in Western media.

Western media should come to understand that it is no longer a business of "home news abroad". Their earlier conception regarding presentation of news to an audience at home is no longer at all feasible. These media no longer cater solely to the specific needs of a home audience, but have become global actors. This has happened by design and not by chance. International media in the West have chosen to operate within zones of conflict and make their presence felt, even in the face of local competition in many countries. Secondly, the rise of the Internet and social media has brought the world too close to distinguish between at home and abroad, especially when it comes to information creation and sharing.

Local fixers try to get whatever income and recognition they can by working with international journalists and putting up with the demanding attitudes of parachute correspondents, as well as occasional freelancers, who are even worse. Physical and psychological trauma have become routine, with no signs of any effective remedy on the horizon. On-and-off trainings and other capacity-building exercises are never aimed at long-term solutions, but instead serve organizational self-interest or other policy measures, and are merely intended to keep people engaged. Both national and international news organizations should recognize fixers as international journalists. This is not impossible. If there is an International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)<sup>7</sup>, it would not be impossible to start an organization representing all professionals who contribute to international stories. A code of ethics is urgently needed to streamline the agenda of international correspondence. This should include everything, including wages, recognition, capacity building, work ethics, and all related aspects that could bring the profession and professionals together on the global stage. The lifting of local news stories for international news organizations has also become a recognized and legitimate practice, which has not been discussed at any forum. The ethical aspect of this practice is quite doubtful, and so there is a need to formally develop a structure for such sharing. At the very least, the local reporter contributing to a story should if possible be recognized and suitably compensated. The world must understand that the fixer also has a career and a need for recognition, advancement and financial gain, along with security concerns that are as valid and important for him as they are for naive, inexperienced participants in international correspondence, the Western journalists.

The diversification of news content has gone together with the search for more presentable, interesting content to be used in the competitive market and more so in web content. Instead of looking for isolated scoops, fixers could be given orientation to develop local profiles in all areas. This will also break the image myth, where every country or even region is seen through a specific colonial lens. This has already created much dissatisfaction in the local population, and one can see the impact on social media. The international media could easily do this in a cost-effective manner. And this is not an innovation.

*Al Jazeera* is already doing human interest and humanitarian stories examining all facets of cultures. This practice should be expanded and universalized.

Last but not least, journalism teaching institutions should reinvent themselves to face up to the new challenges of international journalism. This is important in many ways. The most important of these is the prestige international journalists give their alma mater. What if these prestige bringers are no longer needed in the market? Journalism education and the market are very much interrelated. A deeper analysis of the problems and potentials of international correspondence is the need of the hour. An analysis will need to make recommendations to help bring dignity to all participants in international news gathering. The fixer is especially in dire and urgent need of this.

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<sup>7</sup> International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), <https://www.icij.org>

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### The author:

Dr. Altaf Ullah Khan is Professor of Mass Communication at Forman Christian College University in Lahore, Pakistan. Dr. Khan has a PhD from the Institute of KMW, University of Leipzig, Germany (2004). He has taught development communication, media system in Pakistan, media ethics and laws, issues in communication, peace journalism, and trauma and journalists at the department of JMC. Dr. Altaf Ullah Khan worked as Director Independent Project Reporting (IPR) a joint venture of GIZ, Government of Pakistan, and UoP, IPR. (<http://www.iprjmc.org.pk>) and was the coordinator of Competence and Trauma Centre for Journalists (CTCJ) at Peshawar University.  
Address: Forman Christian College, University in Lahore. Ferozpur Road, Lahore 54600, Pakistan  
eMail: [altafkhan@gmail.com](mailto:altafkhan@gmail.com)