

## **Reporting Global while being local: Local sources of news for distant audiences**

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**Abstract:** This article introduces the special issue entitled Reporting Global while being local: Local sources of news for distant audiences. It discusses the rationale behind this special issue's focus on local newswriters who contribute their labour to international news-reporting and reviews research conducted on the work and working conditions of these newswriters to date. The article then goes on to describe the articles that appear in the special issue.

There has been copious research over the decades concerning foreign correspondents who report on distant crises and conflicts for audiences back home, but news professionals working *in their own countries* but *for distant audiences* have only garnered passing attention of researchers. But such news-staff – termed 'local-foreign' by Hamilton and Jenner (2004) – have long played essential roles within international news production, as the foreign correspondents and news reporting teams who depend on them tend to readily admit. This special issue is intended to shift the attention of those who study journalism to the largely neglected informal industry of local newswriters who facilitate, and (perhaps) actively shape, global news reporting. Such people are typically known as fixers (logistical, cultural and linguistic aides), stringers, and translators, but can include a far wider variety of roles including reporters, photojournalists, videographers, technicians and more.

In scholarly debate about how cultural goods flow around the world (Schiller, 1976, 1992 [1971]; MacBride, 2004 [1980]; Tomlinson, 2001 [1991]; Park & Curran, 2001; Thussu, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2013), international news has long been seen as dominated by large media institutions based in Western countries, resulting, many have argued, in an ideologically Western or even Anglo-American formulation of global news (e.g. Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998, 2004; Thussu, 2004; Wasserman & De Beer, 2009; Paterson, 2011).

This understanding has been challenged by a more recent suggestion that international news should now be seen as 'hybrid' and not Western (Bromley and Clarke, 2012: 1-16; Waisbord, 2013: 222-33). This view sees international journalism for global audiences as "a transnational and collaborative process" (Palmer, 2018a: 317). But while a more cosmopolitan "international space" (Murrell, 2015: 7), helped by globalization may have come to create a "messier" reality in international news production (Palmer, 2018b: 1333), patterns of Western dominance in global

news cannot be said to have simply disappeared (Jun & Ha, 2010 cited in Bromley & Clarke, 2012: 12; Paterson, 2011, 10-18).

### **Who produces international news?**

The tacit understanding that international news meant for global audiences is produced solely by Western journalists is no longer tenable, with the traditionally invisible labour of local newswriters producing news for distant audiences becoming ever more visible. This is simultaneously giving rise to calls for addressing the issues of precarity and heightened insecurity which those local newswriters face every day. Most recently this was seen in the case of the Reuters journalists from Myanmar, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were imprisoned for reporting on state violence against Rohingyas. Lone and Oo were subsequently pardoned and released after an international outcry from the public, civil society, policymakers and governments (Lewis and Naing, 2019). Academic understanding of the emerging problems and issues in contemporary international news production reflects this growing awareness of the role played by local newswriters in producing news for global audiences.

In the case of the traditionally less-investigated form of journalism performed by local newswriters, researchers are striving to understand the emotional, cultural and *journalistic* aspects of the labour they perform. Scholars are also paying attention to how long-criticized hegemonic practices within international news production which prioritise Western perspectives and norms are giving rise to frictions within international systems of news production as local news-staff come to terms with them. Challenges to the stereotypes and biases in news produced from Western perspectives are emerging (see e.g. Bunce et al., 2017), but such challenges to traditional dynamics of Western dominated storytelling have also been shown to be dependent on change in the current configurations of the established hierarchies of editorial power. Relatedly, locally-based activists and NGO workers have come to be accepted within international news production as sources of news and information, creating another set of tensions and struggles between professional journalism and advocacy-based information sharing (Wright, 2018).

Reliance on local fixers and journalists within international news production continues unabated today as does the reliance on locally-based non-journalistic sources. We hope for this special issue of the *Journalism Studies* to contribute to both the breadth and depth of our future understanding of who produces international news.

### **Focus on the professional, specialized *locals***

The journalistic work and practices of foreign correspondents who report from areas affected by crises and conflicts for an ‘audience back home’ have long been part of popular consciousnesses. From *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh set in Imperial era Africa to *Somewhere I’ll Find You* starring

Clark Gable in 1942 to 2019's *The Hunt*, a 5-minute-video released online associated with the camera company Leica (BBC, 2019), the profession has long been idealised and valorised (or satirized by Waugh) in such ways that Western males occupy centre stage. Unsurprisingly, the role of the Western male foreign correspondents – the “professional, specialized tourists” as Susan Sontag described them (2003:17) – had been the most studied and discussed in different contexts and conflicts (Hallin, 1984; Pedelty, 1995; Thussu & Freedman, 2003; Hannerz, 2004, Knightley, 2004; Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Tumber & Webster, 2006; Paterson, 2019).

However, this entrenched understanding of who produces international news, especially of conflicts, is shifting within academia and beyond it. In addition to the role played by female journalists (e.g. Orgeret, 2016; Palmer & Melki, 2018), scholars have started to recognize the role played by non-Western newswriters who are (and one might say long have been, if for example we think of Cambodian journalist Dith Pran on whose life the 1984 film *Killing Fields* was based) part and parcel of international news production.

Mark Pedelty (1995) was perhaps the first researcher to observe and describe the role played by local journalists who worked alongside Western foreign correspondents. He mentioned that there were “many indicators that Salvadorian and foreign journalists work within very different social and psychological contexts” (1995: 208). Nonetheless, apart from this brief observation, studies of local newswriters engaged within international news production have been scarce.

The roles and responsibilities of these ‘professional, specialized locals’ within international news production have increased as falling news industry revenues have meant reductions in non-local staff assigned to foreign news bureaus and the need to hire cheaper (and more ad hoc) journalistic labour has grown (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004: 301-321; Hamilton, 2012: 211-222; Otto and Meyer, 2012; Murrell, 2015: 1-22). There is also a growing ‘safety culture’ in international news production as recent conflicts have tended to be more dangerous for foreign journalists (Palmer, 2018c); that culture seeks to shield foreign correspondents while relying on news produced by journalists who call conflict-affected countries their primary or secondary home. For example, Paterson (2014: 166-168) found in his study of US-inflicted journalists’ deaths in ‘the 9/11 wars’ (Burke, 2011), that over half (17 of 32) involved the killing of a local media worker assisting with international reporting. As Palmer (2018a: 316) has noted, “it is only in the age of the so-called ‘war on terror’, when conflict zones have become increasingly dangerous and the dependence on local news staff more pronounced,” that the acknowledgement of agency of local sources in international news has been growing: both within journalistic circles and in academia.

### **Local sources of news for distant audiences**

While Hannerz (2004: 147-178) made a passing mention of the role of news fixers within his ethnographic study of foreign correspondents, Hamilton and Erickson (2006) discussed the role

of fixers as vital support systems for foreign correspondents. Tumber and Webster (2006: 106-115) dedicated a chapter describing the work of fixers based on interviews with British journalists within their study on war reporting. In the following year, Palmer and Fontan (2007) specifically focused on the role of fixers in co-producing news about the Iraq war. Their study, like Tumber and Webster's, was also based largely on interviews with foreign journalists working in the country and concentrated largely on their role as linguistic aides to foreign correspondents. However, exploring the work and practice of fixers within international news production has since then incrementally shifted to start making sense of their work largely from their own perspectives and perceptions (Paterson et al., 2012; Palmer, 2018a; 2019).

While Hamilton and Jenner acknowledged the role of local-foreign correspondents back in 2004, Bunce's (2010) study of the cultural clash in the East Africa bureaus of international news organizations, where Kenyan journalists worked side by side with foreign journalists, was the first to seek to understand first-hand the work and practices of local journalists within international news production. A relatively lesser-known study by Khan (2011) was published in an edited volume (on forces of globalization at work in Afghanistan), and explored the work of local journalists in Pakistan who worked for and with international journalists to report on the Afghan war. Khan has since returned to the issue and provided more recent insight on fixing work undertaken by journalists in the frontier areas of Pakistan for international news media (2019). Seo (2016) has shed light on the role played by 'local journalistic hires' in foreign bureaus run by the global news agency Associated Press over the last few decades by utilizing archival interviews kept by the news organization. A relatively neglected area for long, the work of local photojournalists who provide images for global audiences have also started to come into focus in recent scholarly investigations (Istek, 2017; Mollerup & Mortensen, 2018; Mitra, 2019).

Another emerging and perhaps better-researched trend in this respect is the growing influence of locally-based activists, advocacy groups and non-governmental organisations, on international news production (Fenton, 2010; Waisbord, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2015; Conrad, 2015; Powers, 2016). The growing inclusion of local non-journalistic agents who produce news, information and images for international audiences is also a consequence of budget-slashing by global news media. Particularly in their exploration of the agency of local NGO workers and activists' contributions to international news, this area of study shows that 'local-foreign news production' can be understood as expanding today not only in magnitude but also in the kind of actors involved.

Available research shows that the involvement of local journalists and fixers as well as non-journalistic sources of news and information in international news production – a small part of what might be a larger shift towards transnational and collaborative international news-making – is far from being harmonious and is marked by economic, socio-cultural and practice-related tensions. Tensions have been noted to arise from non-recognition of the journalistic labour provided by the local news-staff by their news organizations (Murrell, 2015; Seo, 2016; Palmer, 2018a; Khan, 2019) as well as because of differing employment conditions of the local

newswriters as opposed to their international colleagues. In this context, research has shown that the work of local-foreign newswriters is typified by more precarious, and often dangerous, conditions of employment (Tumber & Webster, 2006: 106-115; Bunce, 2011; Khan, 2011; Paterson, 2014; Mitra, 2017; Palmer, 2018c; 2019). Apart from these tensions within the context of the professional experience of local journalists and fixers, some researchers have also investigated differences in news values and role perceptions (Bunce, 2011; Khan, 2011; Mitra, 2019) as well as similarities (Murrell, 2015) compared to international journalists: another potential site of tension.

Finally, some researchers have pointed to how processes of news production within local-global journalism are affected by “‘inside’/‘outside’ cultural dichotomy” (Bunce, 2010: 527) because the identity-based affiliations and affinities, as well as the local knowledge and familiarity of the local journalists and fixers, are perceived as important factors in international news production by local newswriters (Bunce, 2015; Murrell, 2015; Palmer, 2019). While early research on the role of fixers, tended to view such differences as negative influences on news production (Tumber & Webster, 2006; Palmer and Fontan, 2007), increasingly researchers are also recognizing the potential positive influence that such local affiliations and affinities, knowledge and familiarity of the local journalists and fixers can have on international news (Paterson, 2011; Bunce, 2015; Mitra, 2017; Palmer, 2018b; 2019).

### **Reporting global while being local**

International news today needs to be understood as a chorus of voices – both foreign and local as well as professional and non-professional. Not all voices might yet have the same potential to be heard around the world however because research has shown that international news production can be shaped by both local story-telling objectives as well as efforts to conform news narratives to those perceived as preferred by foreign clients and audiences (Bunce, 2015; Mitra, 2019).

In this complex, messy reality of international news production of today where past patterns and present factors are shaping the future of foreign news, one thing is certain. International news production is morphing in ways and forms that are both geo-culturally specific to areas and regions, but also socio-economically comparable across the world. This special issue is inspired by the need for geographically broad, theoretically deep, methodologically sound, and culturally sensitive understandings of the processes and people shaping international news.

This issue grew out of dialogues the editors have had with peers and colleagues engaged in research on local newswriters who produce news for distant audiences. We organized a panel bringing many of these researchers together for the 2018 ICA conference, and, in collaboration with UNESCO, this topic was also the focus of a panel we organized for the 2018 conference of the IAMCR. Several of these panelists have contributed to this special issue. We have also

broadened the scope of the issue to attract relevant contributions from researchers interested in this topic.

The issue begins with research by news agency journalist turned educator Colleen Murrell examining the entrepreneurial nature of local newswork for foreign audiences, and then presents survey research by Shayna Plaut and Peter Klein which helps us grasp the extent and dimensions of such work. With their studies, Moon, Hoxha and Andresen, Seo, and another experienced author in this field, Palmer, examine internationally focused local newswork in Rwanda, Kosovo, North Korea, and Russia respectively. Isharaza guides our focus to the neglected site of local news story production within the communications apparatus of international NGOs. This issue also includes two short essays which the editors invited to offer additional insight into 'local-foreign' journalism from the perspective of journalists' safety (from news agency veteran turned educator Stephen Jukes) and new practices being adopted to make local-foreign collaboration more inclusive (from researcher-journalists of the media organization Global Reporting Centre).

It is our hope to bring together the very latest of studies being conducted which will shape our future understandings of local newswork meant for distant audiences, and help to cement the place of that journalistic work as a vital topic of analysis in its own right.

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