Article

What Am I Doing Here? Self-Reflexivity in Cross-Border Journalism Research

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Abstract

In journalism research conducted in the Global South, power relationships between the researcher and the researched mirror the uneven power structures between the Western journalists and their news subjects or their non-Western colleagues working alongside them. But so far, the figure of the journalism researcher in such contexts has not been problematized to any great extent in journalism scholarship. Moreover, the journalism researcher working in such contexts borrows heavily from the methodological toolkit of ethnography. But while the cultural anthropologists who created and refined ethnographic methodology have long been interrogating the colonial and neocolonial logics that inform ethnographic methods, journalism scholars have yet to significantly engage in such a self-critical project. We take ourselves as the starting points of the self-reflexive critical debate we believe journalism researchers interested in decolonizing journalism studies must have with themselves when it comes to conducting research in spaces of asymmetric power relations within global journalism. Laid out in three first person self-reflexive narratives, our critical questions are prompted by our own geopolitical and embodied presence in Lebanon, Afghanistan, and North Korea. We then discuss the commonalities among the questions that arose from our respective positionalities. Through this grounded, self-reflexive exploration, we aim to position global journalism researchers at the center of critical inquiry.

Keywords

global news, ethnography, self-reflexivity, international news, labor

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In journalism research conducted in the Global South, power relationships between the researcher and the researched often mirror the uneven power dynamics between visiting journalists and their locally based colleagues. But so far, the figure of the journalism researcher has not been problematized to any great extent. Cultural anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and feminist scholars have long engaged in vigorous debates about the power imbalances that underlie academic knowledge production about people who inhabit liminal positions in a globalized world. But cross-border journalism scholarship has yet to significantly engage in such debates.

In this article, we take ourselves as the starting points of the critical debate that cross-border journalism researchers must pursue, if we hope to disentangle ourselves from the power relations that inform our research in liminal spaces. To engage with this debate about reflexive knowledge production, we focus on two questions: (1) What am I doing here? and (2) Who am I to tell these stories? Put into more academic terms, these questions interrogate the privileged position and mobility of the researcher. These questions also help problematize the researchers' role as knowledge producers, asking whether the life-stories of others are ours to share at all. In what follows, we suggest that these simple questions gesture at the complex interplay between power and agency that informs the interactions between "researcher" and "researched." Indeed, we find that such binaries do not adequately describe cross-border journalism scholars' engagement with news workers in the field, and neither do oppositions such as "local" versus "global."

Laid out in three first-person narratives, we engage here with the questions brought up by our own embodied presence as geopolitically privileged subjects in spaces of liminality. We particularly grapple with the doubts that plagued us while conducting fieldwork in Lebanon, Afghanistan, and North Korea. In those spaces, we were researching the labor performed by local journalists and photographers, "fixers," and other journalism-adjacent workers. But studying this form of liminal labor made us wonder what we were doing in those spaces, and whether we were the right people to "tell" these stories. This article further scrutinizes those doubts, as well as searching for commonalities in our experiences. Through these grounded self-examinations, we aim to position cross-border journalism researchers themselves at the center of critical inquiry. By underlining the need for reflexivity in cross-border journalism research, we hope that this article will contribute toward the broader project of decolonizing journalism studies.

Decolonizing Journalism Studies: Identifying the "Local" and the Liminal

Hellmueller and Berglez (2023) argue that there are many terms used to describe journalism that crosses geopolitical borders—such as "global," "international," and "transnational." While these terms are often conflated, they refer to very different aspects of the broader practice of journalism that crosses borders. The term "cross-border journalism" therefore works best for us, particularly because it can help journalism

scholars illuminate the continued relevance of the nation-state, while still attending to the ways in which "the foreign and the international are intertwined with transnational and even global processes" (Ibid: 16).

If recent journalism scholarship is any indication, the future of cross-border journalism is staunchly de-colonial. Indeed, the journalism scholars who focus on locally based news employees in the Global South tend to draw upon decolonial theory as a foundation for better understanding—and hopefully changing—the inegalitarian hierarchies that inform the labor of cross-border journalism. This is partly because the labor of local news workers such as freelancers, stringers, and "fixers" is inherently precarious. Not only are these people routinely exploited by foreign correspondents; they can also face persecution from their governments and their communities, due to their work with foreigners.

Contrary to Kotišová and Deuze's (2022) recent call for the decolonization of conflict journalism studies—a call that suggests a need to move past "older" decolonial theories that focus too heavily on victimization — we argue that focusing on the inequalities that plague cross-border journalism does not automatically negate local news workers' agency. Because of the multiple roles that local producers, stringers, and "fixers" must play, conflict journalism scholarship has already emphasized their creativity and resourcefulness (Arjomand 2022; Palmer 2019). Though many of these workers are professional journalists in the places where they live, some of them also design lucrative careers as ad-hoc entrepreneurs (Murrell 2019). Stringers and fixers certainly have some notable power over who they choose to help, what kind of pay they will accept, and whether to refuse a project that they find to be culturally offensive (Mitra et al. 2021; Palmer 2019). Nonetheless many of these local news-producers and "fixers" work in previously colonized regions of the world, where neo-colonial power dynamics continue to limit the nuance with which they can help their clients cover the story.

These power dynamics also often limit local news workers' ability to ascend the ranks of the transnational news industry financially and professionally (Ashraf and Phelan 2023; Mitra et al. 2022; Seo 2016). This problem certainly does not apply to every news stringer or fixer—particularly those who are White, or who work in regions where European colonialism is less relevant (Hoxha and Andresen 2019; Seo 2019). But in many regions of the world where the past of European colonialism profoundly shapes the present, locally based news workers navigate unequal power dynamics that underlie cross-border journalism.

Research on these news workers has relied heavily on ethnographic methods to illuminate these power relations while accounting for the paradoxes, nuances, and spaces of agency entangled within cross-border journalism as a practice and a profession. This is where our intervention is also situated: cross-border journalism scholars have yet to significantly consider the need for reflexivity in academic knowledge production about locally based news workers. To fruitfully pursue such a discussion, these scholars must engage directly with the trans-disciplinary debate about reflexivity in academic knowledge production.

Researching the "Local" and the "Liminal": The Role of Reflexivity

We do not contend that cross-border journalism scholars have ignored power dynamics or have exploitatively extracted knowledge as a result. Rather, our argument is that cross-border journalism research has not yet systematically explored the need for reflexivity as researchers in and of liminal spaces. These questions have occupied scholars in other disciplines for some time, where encounters between the privileged researcher and the relatively marginalized object of research, or the "researched," occur routinely.

The view that knowledge production in and of liminal spaces must turn back on itself to understand the conditions of its production has been much debated among cultural historians, particularly the Subaltern Studies group (Chakrabarty 2015). Scholars of this group rethought the position of the most marginal among colonized subjects (the "subaltern") in colonial and nationalist postcolonial historiography. Turning back on this "turning back," Spivak (1988) drew attention to the violence recommitted against the subaltern in academic knowledge production and questioned academics' ability to give voice to the subaltern.

Apart from these (largely) archival encounters, cultural anthropologists have also grappled with similar questions (Allen and Jobson 2016). Their debate about the responsibility for the academic researcher may be summed up in Bourdieu's rejection of the instrumental positivism of ethnography in favor of recognizing the relations and conditions of production within which the researcher and the researched meet as a scientific requirement, as much as a political and ethical imperative (Bourdieu 2003 [1963]; Schirato and Webb 2002).

Later, Bourdieu called for not separating knowledge production from itself by viewing method and theoretical framework as independent of the object of study. Instead, Bourdieu argued for embracing "epistemic reflexivity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 26–46) which necessitates a "reflexive urge—simultaneously questioning the object of research and the researchers questioning the object" (Heilbron 1999: 298). This approach asks that social sciences address researchers' geopolitical and sociocultural origins, their positions and interests within the academic field, as well as their scholastic bias toward viewing everyday practices without their social context (Schirato and Webb 2002: 260), that is, "the unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 40).

However, subsequent research trying to emulate Bourdieu's understanding of reflexivity drew criticism from Maton (2003) who noted that reflexivity was often interpreted as an individual responsibility for the researcher to overcome their biases rather than researchers using a reflexive lens to explain what it is that is left unquestioned as a result of such biases more broadly (p. 54). This has, he also argued, led to narcissistic practices in sociological studies, where reflexivity became merely the "critical reflections on the author's history, social position, and practices" (p. 56). In Maton's (2003) terms, such critical autobiographical reflections represent reflectivity

(p. 56) rather than reflexivity, and at best offer "thicker methodology" (p. 54) rather than thicker descriptions of social reality.

Feminist standpoint theorists have made similar arguments. While feminist scholars are critically aware of how embodied identities can affect academic knowledge production (Harding and Hintikka 1983; Patai 1994), others have more specifically argued against reflexivity appearing in feminist research as a "performative ritual" (Sweet 2020: 925). They have asserted that all the "reflexivity talk" (Pillow 2003: 176) in the world cannot offer a way out from the "morass of our own positionings" (Patai 1994: 64) within the advantageous power imbalances we might enjoy as researchers when explaining power relations as experienced at the margins. Sweet (2020) recognizes the merits of self-disclosure as offering methodological transparency that allows the embodied politics of the researchers' presence in liminal spaces to be considered, while also warning against "simple cataloguing of identity traits" (p. 925). She also argues that investigating the dialogic relationship between the researcher and the researched allows for robustly reflexive research and can lead us from thicker methodology to thicker description of liminal spaces and people (Sweet 2020: 933–39).

Researchers in Liminal Spaces: A Reflective and Reflexive Approach

In this article, we individually reflect upon each of our past fieldwork. The first of the three case studies is by Lindsay Palmer, examining her fieldwork in Beirut. The second case study has Saumava Mitra revisiting his time in Kabul, and the third has Soomin Seo analyzing her roles as a journalist and researcher in North Korea.

These self-examinations are individually reflective accounts as Maton termed them, insofar as they are largely about us as researchers. But our individual accounts are also reflexive because they approximate "a reconstruction of the process of the enquiry" (Robbins 2007: 82). In presenting these accounts, our goal is to examine how the subjectivities of the researcher are shaped by the subjectivities of the researched, and quite possibly, vice versa (ibid: 78).

Rather than justifying our presence in regions of the world to which we did not neatly belong, we offer a critical analysis of the questions that arose while researching the labor of "local" news workers. We intend to show how this type of research does not simply reproduce colonial or neocolonial relations, nor does it escape those power dynamics. Instead, we suggest that within the deep structural inequality in researcher/ researched relationships in cross-border journalism research, power and agency unfold in uneven and surprising ways.

Three "Local" Newsworkers

I'm sitting in a chilly conference room at the Lebanon headquarters of Transterra Media, a company that provides visiting journalists and filmmakers with local production assistance. The man I'm interviewing works at this company, helping "foreign"

media producers to tell stories about the Levant. The Beirut traffic is wailing outside the window. It's June of 2015. The man sitting across from me has paused, and the mood in the room has changed. I have just asked him if—during his previous work as a news bureau chief in Baghdad—he ever noticed any of his local Iraqi news workers experiencing death threats or other forms of harassment. The silence in the room stretches. Suddenly, my interviewee begins to cry.

"I'm sorry," the man says, wiping his eyes. He is probably in his early 60s, and although he can now be defined as "local support staff" for visiting journalists, he looks just like the aging war correspondents in the movies. He's White, he's stocky, he's from the United States, his face is riddled with lines. "I was just thinking about some things." He gathers himself and tells me about his local Iraqi collaborators who were shot dead, ostensibly as punishment for working with a U.S. news organization.

Some of this man's most traumatic memories are from his time as a war journalist. They're haunting him here in Beirut, where he now falls into the category of locally based news worker. Perhaps he feels an affinity with me because I am also from the United States. Perhaps this is why he broke the "macho code" and allowed himself—a former war reporter—to cry in front of me. But I can also see the gulf between us. I have never been in a real war zone. I have never lost a colleague to murder, although a few of the people I interview for this research will eventually be kidnapped or killed. He and I are both White people from the United States, "foreigners" here in Beirut. But we are not the same.

On a different warm day in Beirut, I sit in a coffee shop near the American University and listen to a young refugee from Syria tell me that he soon plans to swim from Turkey to Greece. We're having this conversation because he has worked as a fixer here, ever since he fled Syria. He wants to make sure I understand that his work as a fixer is temporary. He is a filmmaker, and he has better things to do than tell someone else's story. "Fixing" is a way to make money while he plans his escape.

He also wants me to understand that many of the journalists who travel to Beirut know almost nothing about this place, or about the people here. He eyes me skeptically and smiles a bit. For some reason, we begin discussing the local taxi drivers. He wants to know what I've been paying for my rides. When I tell him, he chuckles with pity. "It sounds like they're exploiting you," he says gently, and I can't help but feel a stab of irritation. This man is not the first person to tell me that the cab drivers are capitalizing on my lack of familiarity with the city.

He and I are also not the same. Although he reminds me of my younger brother (same huge dark eyes; same long, curly hair), unlike my (White) brother, this man might be profiled as a potential "terrorist" in the United States. What is more, he has fled his home because of a brutal civil war. I have never watched my city crumble under mortars, nor is it likely that I will ever swim from one country to another in hopes of improving my life. I undeniably enjoy a level of geopolitical safety, global mobility, and racial privilege that he does not.

This lack of "sameness" emerges again when I interview a woman born and raised here in Beirut. She works as a "news assistant" for a U.S. journalism bureau based in town, and she also does freelance "fixing" on the side. She warmly invites me home

with her for tonight's Ramadan feast, a touching offer that I wish I could accept. This is my last night in Beirut, and I have one more meeting scheduled after this one. I also feel like I'm about to collapse with exhaustion. Even so, I feel like a failure. "What am I even doing here," I chide myself, "if not to take every opportunity to engage with the people who do this work?"

She doesn't seem to mind when I decline, but instead tells me about her work with the news bureau, where she receives no benefits, and where her U.S. coworkers are paid more than she is. Though she is upbeat about this issue ("of course, they'd make more, they're American!"), she does confide that she and her local colleagues are often shocked by the lack of knowledge that visiting journalists display. They want to tell the story of her city, she laughs, and yet they don't bother to do the most basic level of homework before arriving. She rolls her eyes.

As she talks, it strikes me that my body is also marked with the same privilege that most, if not all, of her American colleagues enjoy. Our lived experiences are different, and unequal, just because of where I was born and the Whiteness of my skin. I'm painfully aware that as White, English-speaking, cis-gendered woman academic with a U.S. passport, my job is to engage in deep self-reflexivity about my own social positioning, and my own role in knowledge production (Mohanty 2003; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2022 [1981]).

But there's something that worries me, and it's connected to my interviewees' powerful critiques of the cross-border journalism profession. How do I strike the vital balance between the essential acknowledgment of unequal power dynamics on the one hand, and an equally important acknowledgment of these people's agency on the other? It certainly won't help to become so obsessed with my own self-reflexivity—my own "history, social position, and practices" (Maton 2003: 56)—that I lose sight of the strength, resilience, and utter complexity of the locally based news workers who are sharing their stories with me.

If I waste time with all my hand-wringing, I might end up reasserting the validity of binaristic dichotomies that date back to colonial encounters. For instance, I might make the mistake of thinking that "local news workers" are all exactly the same—a bounded, impermeable culture. But didn't Homi Bhabha say that culture doesn't work this way (1994)? I also might make the mistake of seeing only oppression and missing the agency that's also present.

Working in the shadows of the international news industry, all three of my interviewees are at a serious disadvantage—though each in profoundly different ways. The older White man has gone from a bureau chief to a logistics guy, and he's plagued by the fate that befell his own local support staff in Iraq. The young man from Syria has to literally swim to a new life where he can tell his own stories. And the woman who works as a news assistant has to watch as her American colleagues—who are ignorant about the place on which they're reporting—receive more money than she does.

Seeing this woman as an "oppressed native" would be lazy at best. Through her work as a news assistant, she is perpetually crossing borders and inhabiting disparate cultural positions. She has become an expert at thinking from the perspectives of the visiting correspondents, without losing the ability to offer a pointed critique of the

cross-border journalism industry. This woman's critique resonates, not because she is rooted within a particular nation-state and therefore speaks with the authority of some reductive cultural "authenticity" (Griffiths 2006 [1994]), but instead because she can see that journalists working for U.S. news outlets are "particular" in their own right. They follow specific news values, which are not universal. They aren't better storytellers than she is.

The same holds true for the Syrian man planning his escape to Greece. His dire situation does not prevent him from scoffing at the correspondents who can't navigate the city without him (nor does it prevent him from giving me some much-needed advice on taxi fares). Not a "local" at all, he only falls into the category of "local news worker" because he possesses just enough regional knowledge to collaborate with "foreign" journalists. He's leveraging that knowledge just long enough to get by. Dichotomies like "global versus local" don't really work in a city like Beirut, especially when you're trying to understand the labor of the diverse news workers. There's a reason why transnational feminists like Grewal and Kaplan (1994) wanted to see these binaries overturned. And even though geopolitical inequality is a stark fact, the people who do this liminal work are too complex to relegate to the static category of "victim." They don't see themselves this way, and it's my job to remember this.

"Stay Where You Are, I Will Come to You"

A knowing laugh, a shrug and then polite silence. While in Afghanistan conducting interviews for my research project on the photographic reportage and working conditions of photojournalists, one of them refuses my request for an interview.

I am troubled by his refusal. Have I been seen for who I worry I am? An interloper and an outsider, an extractor of knowledge who retains the privilege of leaving Afghanistan when the time comes? These questions have returned to me whenever Afghan journalists are targeted while doing their jobs, and more recently in 2021 when leaving Afghanistan became an imperative for many. But when I was conducting my research, my struggles with the ethical question of "what am I doing here" were prompted more by my presence in the country than possibilities of future absences.

Was there any purpose to me being here beyond my curiosity—academic and personal? I did feel that I came from an honest place, even though I had parachuted in as a researcher, just as the foreign correspondents have done (Pedelty 2004). My research questions and curiosity were both grounded in who I had once been and who I was now. As a local hire of an international news agency in New Delhi, I had been in the precarious position within the cross-border news industry that most news-fixers and local news-producers often occupy.

More importantly, I felt a kinship. I was born and brought up in the Indian Union, with linguistic, political, and socio-historical ties that allowed me a different awareness of Afghanistan than just that of the "Afghan War" which had prompted so many other "internationals" to arrive after 2001 riding the coattails of liberal peacebuilding efforts (Richmond 2011: 81–4; 157). But rationalizing the politics of my presence through my identity alone wasn't enough.

Scholars have now started to engage with the critical questions that the Subaltern Studies project (Mignolo 2006) raises for the study of communication and journalism (Moyo and Mutsvairo 2018). Thanks to my prior training in humanities steeped in this critical work in Calcutta, I was hyper-aware of their interventions regarding the role of the academic in knowledge production in liminal spaces.

My self-positioning, or posturing as it now revealed itself to be, as a trans-national ally even if a proximal one was just a variant of the privileged locus often presumptively taken by the intellectual, as Spivak had made plain in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Was my attempt at understanding the invisible labor of the photojournalists that makes Afghanistan and the war in the country legible, or to be specific, visible, to the wider world, futile? Given the subjective nature of the experiences of my interviewees and mine own as an interlocutor re-presenting their experiences, by speaking to me, by becoming visible, are they at all representative of the invisible labor force at the periphery of the trans-national news production system that I thought I would make visible through my study?

Making space for the subaltern by the intellectual is an absurdity, Spivak argues (1988: 288). Am I not then committing my own form of epistemic violence through the act of silencing those photojournalists who are not speaking to me: by my choices, by my lack of contact with some, or by any number of the other exclusions inherent in my work? The man with the knowing laugh for example—is he not now rendered invisible by my function as the privileged intellectual, who through the act of representing, reproduces the subaltern (Lloyd 2014; Spivak 1988)? Is this not what I am doing by my interpretations of the voice, speech, language, and subsequently, the photographic images of his colleagues, but not his own?

Carrying these doubts with me, I continued my fieldwork following the extensive and well-meaning, but let's face it, prosaic and formulaic, ethical protocols put in place by my University. But any critique of unnecessary intellectual paralysis (Cherniavsky 2011) in the face of the theoretical unknowability of the subaltern that I reminded myself about, could not fully mitigate my unease toward not just the ethics, but also the politics, of my presence.

An arched eyebrow, a twinkly eye, firm lips curved in another knowing smile. An interviewee turns on her own recording device as we start the interview. People have distorted my words before, she says, now I do not let anyone record me if I do not keep my own record. A survivor of many regime changes, she knows what she is speaking about, and her actions speak to me.

Looking back now, my misgivings about my politics as a researcher were based on my perception of my own position of power as an interlocutor for the people I was interviewing. In these acts of interlocution, I had assumed a static position of power as a researcher vis-à-vis the marginalized workers. As Spivak (2014) had told an audience of geographers two years before when I was in Kabul, the space of subalternity within the global economy of borderless capital is neither merely static nor just dynamic. It is instead an absence that can be both (De Jong and Mascat 2016: 722–3). Often enough, the photojournalists assumed the position of the observer and the recorder of their reality themselves. This was their day job.

It wasn't within my sole power to narrate or re-present within the space of subalternity I had found myself drawn to as a researcher. I was being re-presented too. I was being narrated into the stories of the people who were speaking with me. I was being read by others individually and collectively as I spent time within the close-knit world of photographers working with international news organizations in Kabul. These photojournalists, just like their local news producer colleagues elsewhere, were perennial straddlers of borders (Blacksin and Mitra 2024). They were far better interlocutors of their own experiences, than I was in straddling cultural divides.

I could not silence anybody. I wasn't speaking to people absent in historiography through epistemological violences of the past, lost as lines in the shifting sands of time long solidified into the hard silicate structures of colonial archives. These were persons living through that violence every day and in their own ways reading, speaking, shaping, and narrating the ongoing acts of erasure they experienced.

The unwilling interviewee was not mute but was daily narrating his own existence and his view of his place in the world, through the silent but eloquent medium of photography. He invited people near and far to take part in the ethical act of seeing, and in the political act of witnessing (Azoulay 2008), through the photographs he sent out to the world. His acts of speech were the first utterances of the very long sentences stretching from his finger pressing the camera shutter ending at your finger scrolling your smartphone screen.

If, as Spivak (1999, 2014) contends, the subaltern is speaking all the time, and the political project is to be aware and make others aware of these acts (Griffiths 2018), then my job was not to let my interviewees speak. These people were already speaking, and during the interviews with me, they were merely speaking in another way, in a different register, through a different medium than they did every day, just so that I could hear them speak. The narrative was not produced by me but was produced for my benefit, so I needed to be there for it to exist.

Similar misgivings about what I was doing here would surface again for me when talking to female photojournalists working across Latin America, Asia, and Africa for a later research project. Was I using the male, detached register of scientific objectivity to understand embodied experiences that were necessarily subjective and gendered? What space from which the "sexed subaltern subject can speak" (Spivak 1988: 307) could I possibly recreate within the digital nonplace of a video call placed across the digital, symbolic, physical, and territorial borders that separated us (Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2019)?

Wracked with these concerns as the only male member of the research team, I was reminded of another person who had spoken with me in Kabul. As I expressed concern over her choice to come to where I was, given that there had been an outbreak of violence nearby that day, she said, reasonably and rancourless, "These are my streets, this is my city. . . I am not in danger, you are. Stay where you are, I will come to you." Remembering this exchange helped me understand that these women had decided for themselves where and how far they would come to speak. My job was to be there when they did.

The Works of "Others"

Journalistic work in North Korea often felt like going down a rabbit hole, an alternate universe where the rules of the outside world no longer apply. Here, I could not travel freely to meet people, nor find independent sources unaffiliated with the government. If journalists could only meet with government-vetted people, why were we here in the first place? Is it even possible to produce rigorous and ethically sound work amid constant surveillance? Those were the questions I was asking myself as I entered the country.

Two decades ago, I was among the first generation of foreign journalists to be allowed into North Korea, full of anxiety and anticipation about the unknown. What I did know was that without exception, I was to work with a state-assigned "fixer-minder" at all times.

The North Koreans who work with foreigners are trusted elites within the system, people with unblemished records of loyalty as well as language skills. My first fixer-minder in Pyongyang was an impeccably dressed party member in her 40s. I was the lone female among the foreigners, she was the only North Korean in the pack. I knew she was a spy: the primary job of the fixer-minder was to make sure I stayed within the boundaries of the pre-negotiated itinerary.

Whenever we moved, I saw that our entourage was being followed by someone else who kept a distance. This person kept tabs on my fixer-minder. In other words, the minder, too had a minder, and both likely went back to their offices at night to produce detailed reports about the day. Like in the German film *The Lives of Others* every minute had to be accounted for. Young and ambitious, I thus resented the fixer-minders, who prevented me from mingling with the "real" North Koreans, sometimes engaging in strenuous negotiations over access to different places other than the landmarks Pyongyang wanted us to see. But mostly, I kept my distance from my fixer-minders, thinking such was ethically necessary.

Over the years, however, I inevitably formed friendships with these people I met over and over again, exchanging updates about our families, the one topic we could talk freely about. My experience and those of Pyongyang correspondents I study show that the North Koreans came to not only understand but also to internalize Western news values. They were increasingly pitching story ideas and photo shoots that they thought would be received well abroad. The growing collegiality between the foreign journalists and the fixer-minders began to resemble other relationships between journalists and the stringers and fixers I have witnessed in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

This puts the local fixer-minders in a dangerous place. In effect, they become insider-outsiders, people capable of bridging the vast ideological, cultural, and social gaps between North Korea and the outside world. The regime eyes them with suspicion, which is why they are called people with "one foot in prison and one foot out," as the saying goes in Pyongyang. Some of these fixer-minders disappeared, but many others have gone back to their day jobs in Korea Central News Agency or Rodong Sinmun.[1]

The porousness of the boundaries demarcating who is a fixer, minder, or local journalist is a theme I would pick up after my transition from journalism to academic research, where I continued to interact with my former tribe—the international press corps in North Korea. Globally, an entire group of people whose daily job includes gathering, processing, and vetting news is missing in journalism studies. Their work is not considered journalism because they work for state organs like Xinhua and Islamic Iranian News agency, and their primary identities are that of bureaucrats rather than journalists.

Our understanding of the dynamics surrounding the researcher and the local journalist must also embrace these people whose work might exist outside the boundaries of Anglo-American journalism (Voltmer 2013). Are we not missing out by not paying attention to alternative traditions of news and journalism outside the West? Roudakova (2017) shows how in the Soviet Union, a culture of truth-telling existed as part of the social contract between the people and the journalists working for state media outlets, which continues to this date in both state and private media in Putin's Russia.

In recent years, I conducted research on a very different group of journalists from those in North Korea and Iran: the defector journalists. As members of the diaspora, the defector journalists conduct their journalistic work entirely from outside the country. Their work has become increasingly important as they fill a void in original, in-depth news about the countries. As such, they often receive much political attention—and often financial assistance—from private and public sources. These resources have turned some of the defector journalists into public personas. While some defector journalists produce excellent journalism, others profit from sensationalistic stories.

The defector journalists told me they were conditioned by the cash payment practice of some international press which awards them hundreds of dollars per interview. The international media had little choice but to follow these stories since the defector stories commandeered much attention in Washington D.C. Although defector journalism became a major ethical issue, I hesitated to broach it due to my own circumstances, as I come from a family of North Korean refugees who fled back in 1950. I subsequently grew up in postwar affluence in South Korea, in great contrast to my former North Korean contemporaries fleeing mass famine. Would it not be desirable for the defectors themselves to address ethical and epistemological issues in defector journalism? To this date, I have not published the bulk of my data concerning their work.

Almost everything is more complicated than we think, and the local journalistic labor concerning North Korea is no exception. Duncan McCargo talks about the polyvalence of media in South Asia, a plurality of voices that comes from a history other than liberalism. He explains polyvalence as a strategic choice "adopted by media proprietors to maximize their influence and to help ensure their survival" (McCargo, n.d.). I am reminded of such plurality of voices when I think of news workers outside the West, particularly in more restrictive environments.

On the one hand, the North Korean journalists I met were spies, censors, and manipulators, undermining the work of foreigners like me. On the other, they were

informers, collaborators, and colleagues, possibly sacrificing their own futures in the process. Conversely, the defector journalists I met have emerged to become part of the commercialistic news ecology in the West, filling the void in North Korea-related news with their polyvalent approach to journalism. Their identities, the circumstances of their existence, and their work can hardly be flattened to simple narratives of coloniality, subalternity, or invisible labor within cross-border journalism. This is because journalists and journalism scholars so often assume their work is "other" than journalism. That it exists beyond the boundary of journalism altogether.

Discussion

To briefly sum up each of our accounts, in the first case, Palmer's experience underlines the unequal power dynamics in researcher–researched relationships, but it also contains an equally important acknowledgment of people's complex agency. Mitra comes to a similar conclusion by understanding his own presence as a researcher within what he realized was not a subaltern "absence" that needed to be articulated, but rather a space full complex narratives where he was only one of many narrators. Seo approached her self-examination by inhabiting the dual identity of the journalist and researcher. By starting from one professional position and reaching the other, she foregrounded how professional boundary-setting is true not only for the journalism profession (Carlson 2016) but also in the research of cross-border journalism. In all three reflections on our fieldwork experiences, our self-reflexive questioning of our own presence as researchers allowed us to recognize the diverse power inequities that we were entangled in (Maton 2003).

The first type of power inequities stemmed from our geopolitical positionings. Our national identities, and trans-national identity as the descendant of an émigré for one of us, informed how we understood our privileges as researchers. These identities influenced how we were seen, although not necessarily in the ways we had anticipated. But our geopolitical identities did not stand alone—instead, they intersected with our respective layered identities. For example, Palmer's age and gender complicated her national proximity with the White American bureau chief she interviewed. These intersections point to the fact that the power inequities that defined our position as researchers were not static but dynamic, and—more importantly—they were relational. Recognizing this in each of our cases allows us to give a thicker account (Sweet 2020) of how the hierarchy of power was inflected by the perceived and actual agency of the people we were researching.

Crucially, the power dynamics seemed to shift when we each realized that our interviewees could navigate the spaces we inhabited far better than we could on our own. This is apparent in our descriptions of how the "fixer" scoffed at price-gouging by taxi drivers when Palmer moved across Beirut, when government minders circumscribed Seo's movements as a journalist, and when one of his research subjects told Mitra to stay put while she made her way to his location in Kabul.

The power dynamics also seemed less unidimensional when our interviewees made it clear that they could tell their own stories better than other journalists (or academics)

ever could. Palmer encountered this in her interaction with the filmmaker from Syria as well as with the news assistant who invited her home for Ramadan. Mitra understood this when one of his interviewees decided to capture her own recording of the interview, and this same observation is what has kept Seo from publishing much of her data on defector journalists. In other words, we each encountered the everyday agency of our research subjects whose profession hinged on their twin capacities to narrate and navigate their respective locations.

In this realization, we find common ground with critical ethnographers who have described the "disorganization, incoherence, and lack of sense" in social relations that only becomes apparent in ethnography conducted in everyday contexts (Smith 1987: 95). They have also highlighted the incapacity of structural analysis of power in social relations to identify such agentic experiences in "life as lived," (Abu-Lughod 2000: 262), arguing instead that these experiences can only be described through research that focuses not just on the "local" but the locations of research (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Our work also shows that "thin" descriptions (Geertz 1973; Marcus 1998) of news-producers, fixers, and journalism-adjacent workers' labor cannot capture their everyday agency and so it is rare—with a few notable exceptions (Arjomand 2022; Blacksin 2023)—that cross-border journalism researchers are prepared to encounter it.

But our inference is also that such everyday agency experienced in location and in relation to the researcher does not supersede the power structures that link the multiple sites of research on marginal labor in cross-border journalism. This structure is ultimately, utterly, imbalanced in favor of the researcher, especially those like us who are based in academic institutions in affluent countries. Palmer didn't need to swim to Greece. Mitra didn't need to scramble, under fear of imminent death, onto a flight leaving Kabul. Seo's mobility back across the DMZ was guaranteed, to an extent. We keep firmly in view the structural inequities which allow us this greater mobility across borders, even if our agency as narrators is co-dependent on those we research.

Conclusion

If the patient reader at this point expects the authors to provide neat solutions, resolutions, or even absolutions for the future journalism researcher, perhaps in the form of a simple toolkit that the "anti-oppressive researcher" (Moyo 2020: 186; see also pp. 210–4) can adopt, we are sorry to disappoint. If anything, through the process of talking and debating with each other, while co-producing this article, we have convinced ourselves we cannot offer such a standard list of procedures.

What we can offer is our conviction—achieved through this self-reflexive exercise—that in the future, we want to keep in view both the fundamental inequities and the everyday agency that inform the labor of the people who are marginalized within cross-border journalism. We are convinced that both these realities should be linked to broader questions about epistemological reflexivity in journalism research. These realities must also inform efforts at decolonizing the methodology of journalism research conducted in spaces occupied by journalistic actors who do not fit easily into binaries of "foreign and domestic," "global and local," or "national and international."

And so, finally, we suggest that grounded self-examinations on the part of journalism researchers must begin, not stop here.

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Note

1. The official newspaper of the central committee of the Workers' Party of North Korea.

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