

# **Journalism “fixers”, hyper-precarity and the violence of the entrepreneurial self**

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## **Abstract**

*The figure of the so-called journalism “fixer” has received overdue academic attention in recent years. Scholars have highlighted the role played by fixers in international news reporting, a role historically obscured in the mythos of the Western foreign correspondent. Recent research has produced useful insights about the work done by fixers in “the shadows” of the international news economy. However, it has also tended towards a domestication of the role, where the local “fixer” finds their place in a collaborative relationship with those officially consecrated as “journalists” from elsewhere. This article presents a critical theoretical analysis of this functional role, building on the image of the fixer as a kind of “entrepreneur”. Rather than interpreting the latter designation as a source of empowerment or agency, we approach it as a euphemism for the hyper-precarious and exploitative underpinnings of fixer-labour. Our argument draws on different theoretical sources,*

*including Foucault-inspired work on the entrepreneurial rationality of the neoliberal self, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, and Ranciere's concept of politics. The theoretical argument is supported by the first author's reflections of working as a Pakistani-based "fixer" during the U.S-led War on Terror.*

**Keywords:** Fixers, journalism labour, war on terror reporting, entrepreneurial self, symbolic violence, neoliberalism, Ranciere.

## Introduction

Let us begin by juxtaposing two moments from the 2009 HBO documentary *Fixer: The Taking of Ajmal Naqshbandi*. The first comes in the opening minutes. It features Ajmal Naqshbandi and the American investigative journalist Christian Parenti right after they entered the back of a car having just carried out a tense interview with members of the Taliban outside Kandahar city, Afghanistan. The momentarily exuberant Parenti turns to the same video camera used to interview the Taliban and pointing to Naqshbandi says "this is the best fixer in Afghanistan, right here...that's Ajmal". The smiling, but more subdued, Naqshbandi responds with simply "thanks". Parenti then directs his attention to the cameraman and taxi driver, describing them as "the best TV journalist in Afghanistan" and the "best tax-cab driver in Afghanistan".

The second, more poignant, scene comes near the end of the documentary. This time it features Parenti in translated conversation with Naqshbandi's father, now in grief after the brutal beheading of his 24 year old son by the Taliban. Parenti pays generous tribute to Naqshbandi:

Amjal was a great journalist...I was so impressed by him. He was so young...I always forgot how young he was. I always thought of him being ten years older than

he was, because he was so calm and wise – he knew how to read situations correctly and, you know, he was very honourable in how he dealt with people. He was a very impressive person and a very good journalist.

Parenti's words are translated into Persian by his assistant, and retranslated again in the documentary's English subtitles. To the seeming appreciation of his father, Naqshbandi is described in one passage of the sub-titles as "truly an expert in the field of journalism".

We begin with these scenes because they offer a resonant starting point for thinking about the cultural political economy of how certain forms of journalistic labour are designated as "fixer" work. The term is regarded by some (including many academics) as a pejorative and is especially fraught for those working in the role who would otherwise describe themselves as *journalists*. In the naturalized attitude of their working relationship, Parenti describes Naqshbandi by his on-the-job title of "fixer". However, when Parenti tries to console the grieving father, Naqshbandi is given the more elevated title of "journalist", and cast as a member of the professional "field" of journalism. We make this juxtaposition not to shame Parenti – his intentions in the conversation with Naqshbandi's father were noble. Rather, we cite it because it suggests a hierarchy of value that structures the journalist-fixer relationship that is often invisible as part of the relationship's mundane functioning.

This article reflects on the exploitative and neo-colonial conditions of fixer labour. The figure of the journalism fixer has received welcome attention in journalism studies in recent years. Scholars have highlighted the role played by fixers in international news reporting, a role historically obscured in the mythos of the Western "foreign correspondent". Recent scholarship has produced useful insights about the work done by fixers in "the shadows" (Palmer L. , 2019) of the international news economy, including work informed by political economy perspectives that connect fixer work to a thriving global informal

economy. Researchers have also highlighted the physical risks and challenges that local media workers face when working as fixers with foreign correspondents/journalists (Baloch & Andresen, 2020). However, despite this overdue attention, the academic literature has tended towards a domestication of the role, where the local “fixer” finds their place in a collaborative relationship with those officially consecrated as “journalists” from elsewhere. Scholars have recognized the power relations structuring the journalist-fixer relationship, and drawn on critical theoretical resources such as postcolonial theory (Palmer, 2019) and field theory (Murrell, 2015). Nonetheless, we think more could be done to illuminate the connections between fixer subjectivities and the ultimately political (i.e. contestable) underpinnings of the journalist-fixer relationship.

Accordingly, this article presents a critical theoretical analysis of the functional place of the fixer. Developing insights from existing research, we build on the image of the fixer as a kind of “entrepreneur”. We find the latter designation suggestive. However, rather than interpreting it as a source of fixer empowerment or agency, as others have done, we see it primarily as a euphemism for the hyper-precarious and exploitive underpinnings of fixer-labour.

We develop our argument by first offering an overview of existing research. We then construct a critical analysis of fixer labour based on four interlinked themes. The first discusses the topic of fixer precarity. It highlights general features of a neoliberalized political economy of media that finds accentuated expression in the hyper-precarity of fixer labour. The second engages with the Foucauldian notion of the entrepreneurial self. It critiques the place of entrepreneurship as a pedagogical concept that dictates how precarity should be dealt with normatively, in ways that expose fixer bodies to enormous risks particularly in warzones. The third discusses Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence, which he conceptualized as oppressive power relations that dominated agents are themselves

complicit in. We discuss the concept's usefulness in illuminating how fixer-subjects' reconcile themselves to precarious work conditions. We conclude by stressing the politics of the journalistic-fixer relationship, using the work of Jacques Ranciere to highlight an expansive concept of politics that is entangled in the neo-colonial and racist history of the relationships between so-called "developed" and "developing" countries. The insights of Foucault, Bourdieu and Ranciere are brought together pragmatically; we cannot engage comprehensively with any of these thinkers here, nor do we attempt to reconcile their theoretical differences, or discuss how our argument speaks to the explicitly Marxist perspective of the first author's recent monograph (Ashraf, 2021). We instead prioritize concepts that emerged during our extended conversations about fixer labour.

While this article is primarily framed as a theoretical contribution to journalism studies, our argument is supported by the first author's reflections – in an intimate first person voice – on his experience of working as a Pakistani-based "fixer" for different international media organizations during the War on Terror. Ashraf also puts his experiences of fixer work into conversation with the experiences of two other journalistic-fixers he interviewed as part of a wider study (which offers a more elaborate empirical account of fixer labour than the one offered here; see Ashraf, 2021). Our argument has many dimensions, but the core objective that brings them together is our interest in denaturalizing the role of the fixer in both practitioner and academic discourses.

### **Journalism studies and "fixers"**

The origins of a distinct literature on local journalists' role in international news production can be traced back to Mark Pedelty's (1995) anthropological study of reporting on the El Salvadorian war in the early 1990s. Pedelty did not explicitly talk about something called "fixers", but rather identified a clear hierarchy of journalistic roles in the news production process. The "A Team" included staff reporters and correspondents who worked for elite

media networks in western capitalist countries. The “B Team” was based on low-paid stringers, including local journalists now synonymous with the identity of fixers. Pedelty’s fresh, if not altogether new, account illuminated fixers’ subordinate place in the inequalitarian structures of international news production. It captured a political economy of news production that shaped the reporting of the 1990-1991 Gulf War and intensified in the post-9/11 era. The term fixer became synonymous with the role local journalists play in the production of international news about, and from, conflict zones (Murrell, 2010). Fixers were conceptualized as an “additional information filter,” because they performed an intermediary function of transmitting information between visiting international journalists and news events (Palmer & Fontan, 2007, p. 22). In the context of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Elisabeth Witchel (2004) quoted a university professor who called fixers surrogates, because they functioned as “the Seeing Eye Dogs, or Rangers, for the men and women who can’t safely go out and do the reporting themselves” (para, 8). The fixer was described as a “fluid body”, to signify his/her logistical utility to the news production process (Erickson & Hamilton, 2006, p. 41). Jerry Palmer and Victoria Fontan (2007) observed how common it was for Western correspondents to call Iraqi fixers “our ears” and “our eyes” (p. 12). Another study noted how Palestinian fixers are reduced to “local hands” in the reporting process (Bishara, 2006, p. 19). Some of these studies critique fixers’ working conditions, but they sometimes reproduce an unthinking (even dehumanizing) identification of real people with anatomical metaphors. Framing their trade expertise as an ensemble of body parts, this perspective did not offer any significant theoretical advance on Pedelty’s insights into the subordinate place of fixers in the news production process.

However, recent discussions of fixer work have been represented through the affirmative metaphor of the fixer as a “team” player. Colleen Murrell’s (2015) monograph illustrates this approach. Based on interviews with foreign correspondents and fixers in

different contexts, she highlights the collaborative dynamics of the journalist-fixer relationship and challenges the notion of fixer work as purely logistical labor. Because international journalists get the bulk of local information from fixers, and because fixers continuously share ideas with visiting journalists, Murrell (2015) suggests that the fixer's role is better grasped as a quasi-editorial one, making it an indispensable part of the "teamwork" culture that shapes international news production (p. 130). Murrell illuminates aspects of fixer work that have been neglected by others, including studies that emphasize the ethical challenges of the fixer's role in war reporting (Pendry, 2011; 2015). Nonetheless the harmonious metaphor of the "team" still constructs a certain idealization of the role. It potentially downplays the subordinate place of the fixer in the journalist-fixer relationship and the systems of power that mediate that relationship, including the more imperceptible, but simultaneously more profound, forms of symbolic power and social subjectivity that can be difficult to pinpoint (let alone talk about) as part of everyday work rituals. In her unpublished ethnographic work on Chinese fixers, Julie Blusse (2012) found evidence to support the teamwork thesis. She illuminated fixers' own motivations: many of the fixers she interviewed worked with international journalists to fatten their resumes to find better jobs in related fields. Kenneth Andresen (2015) likewise showed how Albanian fixers working during the Kosovan war were motivated by "a clear determination to report on the war, to learn from the international reporters, and to earn some money" (p. 94). Local fixers saw visiting journalists as their "*mentors*" (p. 156, italics original); compensatory resources for their own lack of training in the Albanian media system. Researching the same geo-political context, Chris Paterson, Kenneth Andersen and Abit Hoxha (2012) examined the international media coverage of Kosovo's independence-day event. They highlighted fixers' capacity to challenge assumptions brought to the local context by visiting reporters: "We observe how dependence on young local fixers allowed the story to move beyond the

confines set by those orchestrating it, but how those fixers also took an interest in controlling the story” (p. 117). These different examples animate the image of fixers as useful sidekicks, who may sometimes prefer to remain “faceless” because they do not want their work to be publicly recognized. They illustrate the complexity of fixer agency and motivations, albeit in structures where they typically have no meaningful individual or collective agency in shaping how their role is assigned and organized.

The question of fixers’ potential editorial role and storytelling agency is an important one in a research field that still “tend[s] to foreground the perspectives of international journalists rather than the perspectives of fixers” (Palmer, 2019, p. 4). It might be reformulated as follows: how can we square affirmations of fixer agency with their professional marginalization, and their place in a capitalist media system where their role is often rendered systematically invisible in the bylines and credits that are the basis of a specific journalistic capital? While the focus on fixer perspectives is welcome, we think more needs to be done in developing a critical account of fixer agency and marginalization. The fixer has always been considered a part of the informal news economy of media corporations; what Lindsay Palmer (2019) describes as a zone of “underground labor” that “is informal and relegated to the shadows”. Palmer argues that the experiences of fixers “allude to the insidious ways in which the logic of colonialism continues to haunt their lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (p. 5). She recognizes the “profoundly hierarchical” nature of labour conditions that force fixers to “relinquis[h] the story” and “sometimes willingly and sometimes unwillingly acquiesc[e] to his or her own erasure from the practice of international news reporting”. At the same time, she describes “the practice of international news reporting as “by definition, profoundly collaborative” (p. 6). Belying the image of fixer work as inherently oppressive, she notes how some fixers she interviewed “thoroughly enjoy their work” (p. 18); just because the work is “underground” does not “imply news fixers’ complete distrust of



their clients or fixers' displeasure with the work they do". Palmer gives closer attention than most to the structural conditions of fixer labour, interrogating its place in a capitalist political economy that other researchers take for granted. Yet, by treating the fixer role as synonymous with a form of affirmative cultural exchange in the news production process, a critique of the place of corporate media capital and reward systems in the structural marginalization of the fixer remains underdeveloped.

There is a risk, therefore, that, despite the increased visibility of fixer "narratives" in recent literature, contemporary academic and journalistic discourses contribute to a naturalization of fixers' place in the economy of local-global news production. A 2019 special issue of *Journalism Practice* examined the work of local journalists in different roles, i.e., fixers, stringers and news photographers. Many of the studies reproduced the sedimented image of the "fixer" as a name for someone who collaborates with those officially consecrated as journalists from elsewhere. The point is sometimes observed critically, in ways that are alert to the term's pejorative connotations. Shayna Plaut and Peter Klein (2019) mention in passing that "fixers" "are often journalists themselves", and that the journalist-fixer relationship is "created, and generated, through the process of colonialism" (pp. 1699-1700). Different contributions to the special issue affirmed the teamwork thesis. Echoing Palmer (2019), some studies celebrated the local-global binary as a process of cultural exchange, calling fixers "cultural translators and news gatherers" (Paterson, Anderson, & Hoxha, 2012, p. 1733). Others recognized the lack of power that fixers have in teamwork dynamics because they "remain to this day temporary workers who can be picked up and dropped by foreign correspondents at a moment's notice" (Murrell, 2019, p. 1979). In tandem, some fixers were commended for "adopting a more entrepreneurial stance" which enabled them to advertise "their skills on websites" and form their own companies" (Murrell, 2019, p. 1679).

Considered as a whole, we think the academic literature needs to better distinguish between the social conditions of what might be called *actually existing fixers* from their assigned “role” in the news production process. This means being alert to aspects of fixer subjectivity that are potentially obscured in the understandable desire of individual fixers to be good “team” players. This perspective militates against reducing real people with their own motivations and own sense of agency to instrumentalist functions that serve to “fix” stories for global media corporations. We argue that an underappreciation of the complexity of fixer subjectivity has not just resulted in a domestication of the role, but also obscured the journalistic value of fixers’ embodied and reflexive experiences, including the significance of the affective labor they expend in maintaining good working relationships with sometimes condescending visiting journalists. In what follows, we highlight the extent to which the “role” is produced as essential labor for contemporary global news production (for further discussion, see Ashraf, 2021).

### **The political economy of “fixer” precarity**

The fixer offers an extreme example of a generalized work condition now experienced by many journalists and media workers. The rise of neoliberal capitalism since the 1970s and 1980s has resulted in the normalization of precarious labour conditions for workers in different sectors and industries (Millar, 2017). The neoliberal era has seen states in the Global North systematically dismantle many of the labour protections that existed under a post-war Fordist capitalist regime (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). The assumption that labour markets *must* be “flexible” became an article of faith for how states and corporations should respond to the competitive challenges of globalization. How workers respond to these structural changes has, in turn, informed theoretical accounts of precarity. Guy Standing (2011) argues that flexible labour regimes have given birth to a distinct kind of worker subjectivity he dubs

the “precariate”. The experience of this “class in the making” is shaped by the “temporary status” of the precarious worker’s casual relations with capitalist production and, by extension, the social bonds that come from secure employment conditions (Standing, 2011, p. 7). The question of precarious subjectivity has been given a distinct political reading by autonomist Marxists (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Instead of seeing precarity as an entirely negative development, they wonder if it might enable an emancipatory horizon that weakens the power of capital, and affirms workers’ capacity to enact radical political change. This theoretical tradition has been especially alert to the affective dynamics of precarious labour, particularly in information, cultural and service industries.

The rise of precarious employment conditions in journalism has been examined by different scholars, though not always by foregrounding the concept of precarity. These developments have overlapped with changes in global news production processes. The closures of international news bureaus by different media corporations has increased dependence on “parachute journalism” and ad-hoc freelancing and, by extension, local fixers and stringers (for further discussion, see Ashraf, 2021). Henrik Örnebring (2018) describes “precarity” as a “new normal” in journalism (p. 109), suggesting Swedish journalists are increasingly “primed” to expect precarious work conditions “as an unavoidable feature of journalistic work (especially at entry level)” (p. 122). Mirjam Gollmitzer (2018) situates this new normal as a product of neoliberalism, showing how neoliberal logics are internalized in Canadian and German journalists’ rationalizations of work conditions that force them to take on PR “gigs” as income supplements to badly paid journalistic work. Criticisms of precarity research for privileging the experience of workers in the Global North are pertinent when thinking about the concept’s application to the Global South (Millar, 2017; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Kathleen Millar (2017) argues that “precarity appears new and exceptional only from the perspective” of countries with a collective memory of the Fordist era, because

“for most workers in the global South, precarity has arguably always been the norm” (p. 6). We might therefore suggest that the normalization of the experience of journalistic precarity in the Global North represents a normalization of labour conditions that have always been the default terms of fixer work in the Global South. Producing journalism in an environment marked by little or no corporate media backing, little or no trade union representation, the normalization of irregular, ad hoc work, and a heightened exposure to risk in the pursuit of commodifiable “scoops”, became hallmarks of a precarious labour regime that finds extreme expression in the work done by fixers in warzones.

### **The fixer as entrepreneur**

Within the neoliberal imaginary, the figure of ‘the heroic, creative entrepreneur’ (Davies, 2017, p. 51) functions as a kind of pedagogical exemplar of how people should respond to a more “flexible” economy (see McGuigan, 2014; Brown, 2015; Jones & Murtola, 2012; Scharff, 2016). Foucault (2008) linked the emergence of neoliberalism to the cultivation of an entrepreneurial subjectivity. The compulsion to act and think entrepreneurially becomes an expectation projected onto all economic actors. The “homo economicus” of 19<sup>th</sup> century neoclassical economics is reimagined as “an entrepreneur of himself” [sic] (p. 226) – someone who must continuously prove and display their market “value” if they want to prosper in a world of intensified competition. Foucault highlighted a historical shift that was exemplified by the theories of “human capital” developed by Gary Becker and other Chicago School economists in the 1960s, a phenomenon that now finds banal expression in the notion of “the self” as a “brand”. The neoliberal subject is summoned to enact forms of “affective labour” that dissolve the relationship between the self and the workplace (Gill & Pratt, 2008). The self starts to see itself as a business enterprise, trying to succeed in a world of precarious opportunities (Scharff, 2016).

Murrell (2019) voices an important insight when she describes fixers as entrepreneurs. However, the problem is that she offers an essentially affirmative account of entrepreneurial subjectivity; entrepreneurship is approached as a means of bolstering fixers' agency, and improving fixer working conditions. To be sure, Murrell highlights the possibility of fixers working together in collaborative ways by reframing entrepreneurship as a social practice. This challenges the dominant mythology of the entrepreneur as a heroic individual. Yet it nonetheless downplays the exploitative, and self-exploitative, imperatives of entrepreneurial subjectivity (Jones and Murtola, 2012). Affirming the image of the fixer as an entrepreneur also obscures the ideological valences of the concept of "entrepreneurial journalism" as it has developed in the journalism studies literature. Anderson (2014) links the concept to journalism's ongoing structural crisis, suggesting it functions as a marketing device for journalism educators to recruit students to courses in an industry where secure jobs are harder to come by. Cohen (2015) argues that treating entrepreneurial journalism as a notional "solution" to journalism's structural problems does little more than internalize a capitalist logic that compels journalists "to steel themselves for the new logic of precarious work" (p. 520).

Let us now support our argument by offering a less flattering account of the entrepreneurial character of fixer labour that is informed by Ashraf's experiences of working as a journalist-fixer in Pakistan. Our selective illustrations (in this section and the next) hardly offer a comprehensive empirical account of fixer experience. They include interview and descriptive components that have been adapted from a book-length study (Ashraf, 2021) that discusses the methodological rationale of the interviews in detail.<sup>1</sup> They are presented here in a deliberately essayistic style, as enactments of the subjective experiences anticipated by our theoretical reflections.

*During the height of the “war on terror” from 2006 to 2010, I worked as a local journalist-cum-fixer in the Northwestern conflict zone of Pakistan straddling Afghanistan and found all my local colleagues readily offering their news services to journalists visiting Pakistan for reporting on counter-terrorism operations. Self-identification with journalism as a profession (even in its reduced state as fixer work) and the compulsion of working to survive in a state of war seemed to reconcile my colleagues to the imperatives of self-entrepreneurship. I found this tendency common and internalized these assumptions myself. But one interview with a videographer-cum-fixer offers a vivid illustration of the risks and emotional labor involved in being “entrepreneurial” in a war-zone.*

*As a local journalist working for the country’s national media, I met Aftab Ahmad in Peshawar, the last Pakistani city 40kms from the Afghanistan border, in the context of reporting on the Pakistan military’s US-funded counter-terrorism operations (for further context and discussion, see Ashraf, 2021, p. 161-162). Foreign journalists were visiting the region in hordes, however, their lack of access to the war-hit areas made them dependent on local reporters. Like other local reporters, including myself, the desire to reach out to a wider global audience and earn some extra funds from side jobs turned many of my colleagues to look towards “fixing” as a desired work opportunity. The situation could be described in stark terms by dramatizing the implications of the entrepreneurship metaphor. War acted as a kind of “market opportunity”, giving my colleagues and myself access to work opportunities and money that would have been otherwise unattainable.*

*Under the circumstances, I found Ahmad to be the most enterprising fixer. A car mechanic’s son, Ahmad had started his first job at the age of 18 working for a national TV channel earning Rs. 7,000 (US \$80) per month . He was appreciated by friends for his agile mind and quick responses, an occupational trademark which made him popular with foreign wire services and visiting journalists. Reporting for his national TV channel, he also*

*provided visuals and camera services to foreign journalists. “Fixing” was a day and night job for him. “My wife once asked me where I go at night,” said Ahmad, “I told her if I am not in bed, switch on the TV [to see me]”. He said that his face turns stiff every time he receives a call from foreign wire services or local media outlets, a premonition of the terror attack he is supposed to cover:*

*“I see people...in pieces...half-dead...half-alive...crying for help...the smell of their burnt flesh...body fats littered on the walls and streets... this is what I feel and imagine when I hear the word ‘blast’”*

*Connecting his job routines to a change in his body chemistry, Ahmad said that covering blasts and explosions has turned him not just hyper-vigilant, but also dangerously adventurous under compelling circumstances. I experienced similar dynamics myself. As a local reporter, I sometimes visited the sites of suicide bombings while working under deadline pressures. Every step I took in reporting on Al-Qaida and the Taliban was a struggle and internal dialogue to defeat myself; to somehow not to think about the threat, and divert my attention toward reaping the potential rewards that a story could bring to my career. Only when I overcame this internal struggle was it possible for me to become a “dangerously adventurous” reporter: that is, a local journalist who may not get any of the immediate journalistic rewards at hand, yet nonetheless develops a reputation for daring fixer work. Acting “entrepreneurially” sometimes felt like self-inflicted torture that works both consciously and unconsciously.*

*The similarities between my own experiences and Ahmad’s were made very clear in my conversations with him. In the quote below, Ahmad communicated his own self-awareness of these dynamics in his reflections on reporting the “war on terror” at the peak of violence in Peshawar:*

*Every passing car was a ticking bomb...I often thought of my glasses...my only distinctive mark to help my family find my body...I was worried...I got Rs 30,000 (US\$ 300) from my media organization...This monthly salary was not enough for my two daughters, one son and a wife...I often thought what they would do after me.*

*Ahmad's quote reflects a media economy where a willingness to expose oneself to more risk often seemed lucrative in financial terms. It held out the prospect of getting paid more money or building a reputation as a bold fixer to attract foreign journalists, even if one never knew which daring moment could be the last of one's life. In my own bids to build my reputation as fixer, I had a close call on six different occasions and lost five close colleagues covering suicide bombings and drones strikes on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan.*

*Ahmad told me he once sneaked into the risky bordering region along with a group of bureau reporters to get the footage of a drone strike. His bureau colleague told him to get every visual on their way to the site. Following the instruction of his senior colleague, Ahmad began covertly panning his camera to get a few close and long shots of the outlawed al-Qaida militants, an act which in the past has taken the lives of local reporters. Before the Arab militants could inquire to make sure that they are not taken on camera, he quickly replaced the Digital Video Disk (DVD). Living this dangerous way, Ahmad sold chunks of his risky and rash journalistic work to Islamabad-based global news outlets and "got his share of US \$200 to \$300 for each video". Working on such risky assignments for years, Ahmad said that he had earned around U.S.\$2,000 each month, in addition to Rs 30,000 (U.S.\$ 300) from his national channel, depending on the intensity of militarized violence in the region.*



*Ahmad's self-entrepreneurial tendency, however, could not continue for long. He was increasingly self-aware of the threat of losing his life. After he established his own studio providing services for making bridal videos, he stopped taking on risky news assignments. In the company of other fixers and local reporters, I often found some of them wondering, in a dark comedic tone, how they would find work once the war ended, and assuming they managed to survive the everyday threat of death. The nature of the fixer economy seemed to force them (and force me) to suppress their pain, anguish, feelings, worries, and expectations about their experiences, for fear of losing work and missing out on the lucrative financial opportunities currently within their grasp.*

### **Symbolic violence and fixer subjectivity**

If entrepreneurship can be conceptualized as an ideological discourse that obfuscates the grave dangers of fixer work, this still invites the question: why do fixers reconcile themselves to such hyper-precarious work conditions? More than a theoretical proposition, the question has practical implications. Palmer (2019) found many of the fixers she interviewed had “internalized” the notion of “individual responsibility”, seeing it as part of *their* job to protect the life of their immediate foreign correspondent employers (p. 165). In other words, instead of news organizations taking responsibility for their local employees (i.e. fixers), the notion of responsibility seemed to operate the other way round.

In illuminating this conundrum, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence is useful. Bourdieu (2000) conceptualized symbolic violence as a form of power that dominated subjects are themselves complicit in. He recognized the concept's generic affinities with Marxist theories of ideology (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1994). Yet he also explicitly distinguished it from the latter, because of Marxists' tendency to explain subjects' self-domination as a product of distorted “consciousness” that could potentially be corrected by

exposure to the right ideas (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 181). Bourdieu stressed instead the embodied nature of symbolic violence. It is not an “act of consciousness...but a tacit and practical belief made possible by the habituation which arises from the training of the body” (p. 172).

Bourdieu’s (2000) emphasis on the bodily complicity of dominated subjects is suggestive here, as it allows us to generalize an image of the fixer as someone who might be conscious of the exploitative nature of their work, while nonetheless submitting to a social regime that is grounded in “the *twofold naturalization* [italics in original] which results from the inscription of the social in things and in bodies” (p. 181)<sup>2</sup>. This is to say that fixers accept their dominated position, not because they have been dazzled by neoliberal ideology, but because they work under conditions shaped by a naturalized understanding of their functional role that anticipates, and requires, a certain docile submission on their part. The “complicity” of the fixer is reframed as a by-product of their banal practical need to “get along with” the other parties in a collaborative relationship that is defined primarily on terms that are outside the control of (individualized) fixers to determine. The concept of symbolic violence becomes a lens for thinking about the affective labour that fixers expend in sustaining relationships with journalistic and corporate employers that they might know are unequal, but that knowledge simultaneously needs to be repressed, or made light of, as part of the smooth functioning of the journalist-fixer relationship. These inequalities might be expressed in, for example, an unequal distribution of financial and journalistic credits, or in the limited capacity of fixers to shape how their region or country is represented in international media. They take an especially poignant form when the journalist texts co-produced by fixers end up reproducing very stereotypical and Westernized representations of their own culture, against the fixer’s initial hope that their input would enable the production of better news stories. These kinds of conflicts are often the intimate tragedy of the fixer’s role, which the first

author illustrates with another Pakistani example (for further context and discussion, see Ashraf, 2021, p. 184-185).

*A tribal reporter, Hussain Dawar, whom I interviewed for my Ph.D. work in 2018, once differentiated for me the condition of local journalism before and after the 9/11 attacks. Coming from a resourceful tribal family in Pakistan's North Waziristan district, Dawar had been elected president of the tribal journalists' association on multiple occasions and worked as a fixer before he was promoted to a 'stringer' position (a journalist paid monthly on a lineage basis) to report for a U.S.-based corporate newspaper. Nonetheless, even after the promotion, his pay was still four times less than his foreign colleagues and he was not entitled to medical facilities or allowances despite working on dangerous assignments in hard areas, so the precarious work conditions remained similar to someone in a fixer role. As dispossession owing to the "war on terror" is widespread in Pakistan, close to around a million people currently live in slums and displaced camps on the margins of the country's cities. Tribal journalists are no exception. Almost all of them, including Dawar, have lived a displaced life outside of the conflict zone, though Dawar's living conditions in Islamabad were better than many of his colleagues. Around 40 of these tribal district reporters have been killed so far. Yet Dawar is optimistic about the future. Using the pronouns 'we' and "our" to reference his tribal colleagues, Dawar believes that the past was more challenging than the present:*

*...our (social) conditions compelled us to join the field...But the situation is fast changing. Now I can see that my one report can affect those conditions which have been regulating my forefathers and me. I am better technologically equipped to improve my condition now. At times, my one cell phone click makes a difference. For example, I went to my ancestral town of Mirali in*

*2016. This was my first visit in the last seven years [because of the ongoing military operation against the Taliban]...the moment my car entered [FATA], I started responding to calls from different media channels around the globe...some needed pictures [Pakistan military destroyed over 80,000 local houses in FATA]. Others wanted to record my feelings. In the next few hours [many channels in] the outside world listened to what I said. I reached Mirali and came back talking to media channels all the way. Reaching Peshawar and later Islamabad, my colleagues enthusiastically asked me questions like, how do I feel going back to my home?.*

*Dawar's experience illustrates the kind of entrepreneurial subjectivity discussed in the previous section. His return to his ancestral home became a kind of personalized media event, where even his "feelings" were a matter of media interest. However, as he narrated his homecoming experience to me, explaining how his networking and reporting had improved over the years, I scribbled down my observations in a notebook that I carried during the interviews. I wrote:*

*"this is strange that he went home but did not tell me if he met his [distant] family [members] or how he saw the destruction [of his house or village] ...he is mainly celebrating his interviews and happy [that] the world's media are interested in his views about North Waziristan."*

*Tellingly, I did not ask Dawar about his village or friends either, as if to implicate my own experience of the divided subjectivity I was observing in him. The interview offered another illustration of something else I directly experienced myself: of how the trauma*

*encountered through fixer work in a war-zone is habitually dealt with through a repression of the personal memory of human and material losses. For instance, every time I entered Pakistan's lawless tribal belt along the border with Afghanistan, I either had to change the routes I previously travelled to try to escape traumatic memories of the last trip or deliberately divert my attention toward lighter subjects. Yet the very feeling of navigating my body through a space that I shared with drones hovering up in the sky was enough to turn my legs wooden. The hopes and expectations of some kind of professional reward kept me going nonetheless. I often found my local colleagues, including myself, trading off these "special spatial feelings" in self-reflective stories once they returned safely from trips to the "lawless tribal land". Such macabre practices were generally taken for granted as a legacy of the conflict-centric reporting.*

*However, it was ironic to find in Dawar's responses a zest that was apparently different from Ahmad's and many of my own experiences. Celebrating the possibilities of post-9/11 journalism, Dawar seemed content with a fixer-stringer role that neither allowed him parity (with foreign journalists) nor proper professional recognition (in global news production process). His homecoming experience offered a vivid local example of the dark side of entrepreneurial selfhood, wherein he was so focused on celebrating the opportunity to report for global corporate media that the pain of encountering the destruction of his own ancestral home (as was the case here) was violently displaced. Accordingly, when I reflect on my time as a journalist-fixer now, I see a pattern of symbolic violence in how my colleagues and myself rationalized and made sense of our fixer work. This deeply embodied and affective experience of self-domination is not something that I think has been clearly grasped in the academic and popular discourse on fixers, because of a tendency to either presuppose a naturalized (and depoliticized) "role" in the global news ecology, or exalt the possibility of fixer "agency" in ways that do not tally with my own experiences.*

### **Conclusion: the politics of fixer labour**

Let us begin our conclusion where we started the article by citing another moment from *Fixer: The Taking of Ajmal Naqshbandi*. This scene comes near the end of the documentary. It takes place in a car. Ajmal is driving while talking in Persian to an unidentified front seat passenger. Parenti (who presumably neither speaks nor understands Persian) is sitting in the back. Based on the English sub-titles, the conversation between *Ajmal* and the front seat passenger offers a raw transactional account of fixer labour. It's not always clear who is talking because most of the conversation in Persian takes places off camera. But as one of them, presumably Ajmal, talks about how he was being sounded out for work by *The Daily Telegraph* in London, he observes:

“I choose who I work with based on who pays best. The money matters. Because these people don't have friendship. They don't know anything about it. They know you while you are working with them. But after that they don't even recognize you”.

The front seat passenger then interjects by saying “They don't even greet you on the street”. Ajmal responds in turn with: “Yeah, all these people are the same. European, American, from London, from anywhere. They don't have real friendships”.

We cite this scene because of how it captures the profound alienation of fixer subjectivity in a war-time media economy similar to the one described earlier by the first author. It illuminates unvarnished truths about the cultural political economy of fixer labour that are euphemized in the images of a naturalized “role.” As we have argued, this role constructs fixers as “team-players” who utilize their energies under the guidance of a

correspondent, or who act as go-getting “entrepreneurs” dealing in risky news in conflict scenarios. However, the banal, but nonetheless dehumanizing, anatomical metaphors of “local hands” and “eyes and ears” suggest that they are neither one nor the other. Our argument has been mediated by Ashraf’s experience of working in a particular cultural context that will surely be different in some important respects from the work conditions faced by other journalist-fixers. Nonetheless, we think our critique of fixer labour will resonate with the experiences of other journalist-fixers. We have not only offered a theoretical evaluation of the role, but also brought attention to a dark side of today’s media economy that finds stark expression in the conditions of fixer work.

In this respect, we see our argument as offering a necessary corrective to some of the functionalist assumptions of the existing literature, and its underdeveloped account of the *politics* of the fixer’s assigned role in global news production. Here we find value in the work of Jacques Ranciere. Ranciere (1999) offers a vision of the political that interrogates our everyday assumptions about where we locate the purview of politics. For him, most of what conventionally takes place in the name of politics would be better described as the domain of “the police”, his term for the taken for granted material-discursive assumptions of the existing social order. He describes the police as:

...an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise... (p. 29).

In contrast, Ranciere (1999) “reserve[s] the term politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks from the tangible configuration” (p. 29) of the existing social order. Politics is “manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure the [policing] space where parties, parts, or lacks have been defined” (p. 30). To act politically means calling into question how roles have been defined and assigned in the existing social order; to expose the false universalism of social arrangements that are presented as complete and natural.

We find Ranciere’s (1999) account of politics suggestive, because of how it cultivates analytical sensitivity to the contestable underpinnings of a global news economy’s infrastructure that designates some bodies as “journalists” and others as “fixers”. It means confronting, in turn, the full implications of the colonial, capitalist and racist histories that have sedimented these “way of beings, ways of doing, and ways of saying” in the first place. Ranciere (1999) allows us to imagine, in a utopian spirit, a future cultural political economy of media where the emancipation of the fixer is paradoxically enabled by the death of the fixer; a world where instead of talking about naturalized relationships between those designated as “journalists” and those given the often faceless designation of “fixers”, we talk about radically democratic relationships between journalist-equals workings in different transnational, national and regional universes. Bringing such a world into being may necessitate political, economic and cultural changes that go well beyond the word of journalism. But we should anticipate it nonetheless as part of developing a critical understanding of the marginalized and alienated place of fixer subjectivity in the global news ecology. In the specific context of fixer research, it would be a mistake to interpret our argument as simply dismissing the significance of practical initiatives that try to improve the employment conditions of journalist-fixers, including initiatives done under the banner of entrepreneurship that exploit the affordances of digital technology (Murrell, 2019). The forms



of politics valorized by Ranciere are not bound to a fixed scale, location or subjectivity, but are rather potentially adaptable to the different sites where the practices of the existing police order might be perceived, and acted on, differently.

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<sup>1</sup> The first author (Ashraf) got permission from his publisher, Anthem Press, to re-use and adapt the extracts here.

<sup>2</sup> By suggesting fixers are conscious of their exploitative conditions, we question Bourdieu's tendency (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992) to downplay the conscious aspects of symbolic violence.



# Journalism 'fixers', hyper-precarity and the violence of the entrepreneurial self

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