REPORTING GLOBAL WHILE BEING LOCAL – COMMENTARY FOR SPECIAL EDITION OF JOURNALISM STUDIES

Abstract:

In the year 2000, Kurt Schork, a freelance journalist working for Reuters, was killed while on assignment in Sierra Leone. His death, along with that of Associated Press cameraman Miguel Gil Moreno de Mora, sent shockwaves through the news industry. But since the turn of the century, the death of journalists has become an all too familiar occurrence and while the targeting of high profile international correspondents such as Marie Colvin has rightly caused international outrage, the overwhelming majority of those killed have been local journalists and fixers whose work often goes unheralded. Since the deaths in 2000, a number of trusts and foundations have been set up to support local journalists and fixers, while academic scholarship has started to focus on their work. But this commentary argues that much more needs to be done to recognise the invaluable role they play in today's newsgathering environment.

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COMMENTARY – IT IS TIME TO RECOGNISE THE WORK OF FIXERS

The ambush came out of the blue at Rogberi Junction where the jungle road branches off to Sierra Leone's diamond mines. The Reuters correspondent Kurt Schork died instantly as rebels sprayed the convoy of journalists and government soldiers with automatic weapons fire. Two of Kurt Schork's Reuters colleagues scrambled out of the bullet-riddled blue Mercedes he had been driving and fled into the bush, hiding for hours and surviving the deadly attack. They later returned to the scene to find that Miguel Gil Moreno de Mora, the Associated Press cameraman who had accompanied them on their reporting trip to the frontline, had also been killed. This was Sierra Leone's bloody civil war, the year was 2000 and the deaths sent shockwaves through the tight-knit band of journalists who had formed their bond covering the Balkans conflict of the previous decade.

Almost 20 years on, the death of two journalists in a far away country is no longer a shock. The world has sadly become all too accustomed to learning of such killings. Of course, journalists have always been targeted, not least in Lebanon in the 1980s and during the long-running Chechnya conflict. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that there has been a step change in the 21st Century, with increasing numbers intimidated, kidnapped and deliberately killed – often with seeming impunity - across the globe. While the murder of prominent foreign correspondents such as the *Sunday Times'* Marie Colvin, targeted in Homs in 2012, is quite rightly greeted with international outrage, the vulnerability of local journalists and the fixers who work alongside foreign correspondents all too often goes unnoticed.

What can be done to draw attention to their role and, more importantly, support the vital work they do in today's newsgathering?

Many foreign correspondents working in the field who, like Kurt Schork and Miguel Gil Moreno de Mora, have specialised in covering conflict and tense international news stories, know all too well how difficult it can be to report in an unfamiliar location without the support of fixers with their diverse skills of translating, driving, local knowledge and 'fixing.' The fact that fixers are the subject of this special edition

of *Journalism Studies* in itself demonstrates that their essential role in today's newsgathering is now being recognised in the area of academic scholarship. But in the world of journalism practice, far more needs to be done. Professional support for fixers is still patchy, and despite support from journalists in the field, this is not always replicated by editors back at head office; fixers often don't have access to the safety training, safety equipment and insurance that international correspondents can rely on; sources of financial support have grown partly through funds set up in memory of murdered journalists such as Kurt Schork and Miguel Gil Moreno de Mora but are poorly co-ordinated; the level of public awareness about the vulnerability of local journalists remains low; and the British government has even refused visas for fixers who were due to attend awards ceremonies in London to be honoured for their courage.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 1,454 journalists and media workers have been killed since 1992. Some of these deaths have been of high profile correspondents – most recently Daphne Caruana Galizia killed in Malta in 2017 and the Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi murdered in Istanbul in 2018; others in the recent past have included Daniel Pearl, Anna Politkovskaya, James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Marie Colvin. Some were well known international foreign correspondents, others freelancers whose name became known because of their abduction and murder. But for every name that makes it into the public consciousness, there are scores that do not. As long ago as 1997 Unesco passed a resolution condemning violence against journalists, stating that attacks also curtailed freedom of expression and the rights of society as a whole. If that call fell on deaf ears then, the same is true more than two decades later. Shortly after the killing of Khashoggi, the *Guardian* newspaper highlighted in an editorial column the growing and widespread threat to journalists worldwide (2018). Unesco itself, in its 2017/18 report on global trends in media expression and development, condemned what it called a "culture of impunity" which emboldens would-be perpetrators of violence against journalists and has meant nine out of 10 such crimes remain unresolved (2018: 17,142). Unesco points out that although the killings of foreign correspondents tend to garner publicity, 92% of the 530 journalists killed between 2012 and 2016 were in fact local reporters (ibid: 16).

The vulnerability of fixers rarely comes into public view, and usually only when they become a casualty of war. The BBC's Middle East Editor Jeremy Bowen has spoken out about the death of his fixer and driver Abed Takkoush who was killed by Israeli mortar fire in 2000. His colleague John Simpson was caught up in a 'friendly fire' attack by US jets which killed 18 people in Iraq in 2003, including his translator Kamaran Abdurazaq Muhamed. But these have tended to be exceptions to the rule, short-lived stories in the deluge of today's 24-hour news cycle.

The fact that fixers are now part of the academic debate and are slowly becoming a greater focus of professional practice owes as much to the changing nature of news gathering as it does to international pressure from organisations such as Unesco. Since the turn of the century, the international news landscape has changed dramatically, offering new opportunities to local journalists and fixers and making their role arguably more essential than ever. International news organisations have been forced to rely more heavily on them as cost cutting driven by the erosion of traditional business models has seen the network of foreign correspondents and bureaux shrink. As Sambrook has pointed out (2010), the trend had begun as early as in the 1980s, pre-dating the Internet, but the contraction has gathered pace rapidly in the wake of social media disruption. International news organisations can now draw on a combination of local journalists and user-generated content to cover foreign news, far cheaper than maintaining a network of overseas bureaux. The breaking news story often initially relies on those caught up in natural and man-made disasters and their ability to capture and transmit in virtual real-time still images and video from their mobile phones. But Western news organisations still fly in high profile correspondents to cover those breaking news stories, as the recent bomb attacks on churches and luxury hotels in Sri Lanka showed. It is in such circumstances that local journalists and fixers become invaluable. And it would have been virtually impossible for Western news organisations to cover the long-running civil conflicts in Iraq and Syria without them.

The increasing focus on fixers in the academic world reflects this shift in the news environment and the changing dynamic of news practice. Until recently, many academic studies had tended to look on the role of local journalists and fixers predominantly from the perspective of the Western foreign correspondent and

international newsgathering, (Hamilton 2009; Knightley, 2004; Williams, 2011). There had been some notable exceptions, with Mark Pedelty, for example, highlighting as far back as 1995 how the work of local journalists can sometimes be undervalued (1995). But only in the past few years has there been more consistent documentation of the invaluable role fixers play through their local knowledge (Bunce, 2011; Murrell, 2014, Palmer, 2007), the fact that they can be still be undervalued (Palmer, 2018) and how vulnerable they can be simply by dint of working for an international news organisation (Witchel, 2004).

Sources of financial support in the West for local journalists and fixers have also increased markedly since the turn of the century although many of the trusts and funds set up represent a journalist's life lost. If any good came of the senseless killing of Kurt Schork and Miguel Gil Moreno de Mora in Sierra Leone, it is that their colleagues, friends and families set up foundations in their names to support local journalists and specifically the work of fixers. Numerous other foundations and prizes have been established to provide a far greater support network than was the case two decades ago. The Rory Peck Trust dates back to 1995 and supports freelance journalists in honour of the cameraman Rory Peck who was killed in Moscow in 1993. It has focused on welfare and safety and allowed countless freelancers to go on hostile environment training courses they would not otherwise have been able to afford. In 2015, the Martin Adler prize, in honour of the Swedish cameraman and freelance journalist killed in Somalia in 2006, was awarded to the Iraqi fixer Hassan Ashwor and the next year to Turkish fixer Angel Istek Alcu. The John Schofield Trust pays tribute to the BBC journalist killed in Croatia in 1995; the Simon Cumbers Media Fund pays tribute to a BBC cameraman shot dead in Saudi Arabia in 2004. And most recently, the Marie Colvin Memorial Fund and Marie Colvin Journalists' Network have been set up, the latter aimed at supporting women journalists working in the Arab world. Some of the winners of awards have also paid the ultimate price for their reporting. In 2007, the Kurt Schork award was made posthumously to the Iraqi journalist Sahar al Haideri, gunned down in Mosul after receiving death threats for a series of campaigning stories highlighting the influence of religious extremists, especially in curtailing the rights of women.

However, this diverse array of sources that local journalists and fixers can draw on for support sometimes appears bewildering from the outside and is crying out for better co-ordination. At a professional level, there have been attempts to bring some of the big players in news together. The International News Safety Institute (INSI), set up in 2003, has built a network of competing news organisations which agree to share confidential information that could help journalists stay safe in the field. The ACOS Alliance of journalism organisations came into being in 2014 following the deaths of James Foley and Steven Sotloff in Iraq, aiming to promote the safety of freelance and local journalists worldwide. It can draw on some powerful media organisations, including Reuters, the Associated Press, the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma and the London-based Frontline Club's freelance register. A section of the Alliance's safety principles is clearly aimed at editors and head offices and states (2015): "Editors and news organizations should show the same concern for the welfare of local journalists and freelancers that they do for staffers." The ACOS Alliance is also working on plans to improve access to insurance for fixers, drivers and translators. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that there is a confusing array of organisations seeking similar goals. At times, there are positive signs that they can come together, as in March 2018 when 17 NGOs joined forces to condemn the killing of two journalists on European soil, Slovak journalist Ján Kuciak and Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia.

But while there has been progress on this front, the same cannot be said of the British government which prevented the first two winners of the Kurt Schork fixer award from visiting the United Kingdom to receive their prize. There is a deep irony here in that Britain, alongside Canada, is hosting an international conference to promote media freedom in London this July. Indeed, the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chrystia Freeland, is a former foreign correspondent and Reuters journalist and has been a vocal defender of a free press (2019). In 2017, the Kurt Schork award went to an Iraqi fixer, Makeen Mustafa, who worked with Western correspondents in Erbil. In 2018, the Syrian news fixer Wael Resol won the prize, having been nominated three times by international journalists who hired him during assignments in Iraq. The judges cited his courage, dedication and flexibility, saying he was a huge benefit to any journalist working with him. But despite such glowing endorsements and to the outrage of the community of international journalists, the British government did not

offer either a visa to attend their respective awards ceremonies in London. It is deeply concerning that one of the government's driving a global campaign to promote media freedom could not support local journalists risking their lives to provide coverage of the Middle East conflict and to help keep Western correspondents safe. In its letter of rejection to Wael Resol, the British government cast doubt on his motives for visiting London (despite an official invitation from the awards committee and the Thomson Reuters Foundation) and whether he would return to Iraq where he is based. This is no isolated case. Winners of other international journalism prizes have also been barred from attending ceremonies in the United Kingdom. It is a problem the Kurt Schork awards and similar organisations have resolved to tackle this year and indicative of the work that still needs to be done to achieve recognition for fixers. When the British government co-hosts this summer's conference to promote media freedom, it would do well to remember their invaluable contribution to international newsgathering.

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