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Media, Molvi and Malala: A perspective on the ethics of news fixing

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Abstract

In this essay, I offer a perspective on the consequences of reporting from a marginalized trade position called 'fixer'. Fixers are daily wage workers hired in global news production to help international journalists report from conflict-hit zones. Back in 2009, the *New York Times* hired me as a fixer to co-produce a documentary on Malala, a pre-teen activist struggling for her right to education in the Taliban-controlled Swat valley at the peak of terrorism in Pakistan. The project was the first of its kind to introduce the protagonist to a global audience. In 2012, the Taliban led by Molvi Fazlullah shot Malala in the head. Though the girl survived and also won the Nobel Peace prize in 2014, popular discourses held the global media responsible for exposing the child activist to violence. This essay takes up the issue of news source security without limiting my perspective to Malala. I highlight, while using Marxist framework, how working as a fixer reduces a journalist to a vulnerable status, exposing him/her to threats, and jeopardizes news sources' security. I argue that the role emerged in tandem with the wider practices of decontextualizing local events, people and stories to fit the consumption patterns of free market economy.

Keywords: Fixing, Journalism Ethics, Malala, Source Security, Conflict, Militarization, Global Media

Introduction

In November 2007, I saw the bright brown eyes of a young girl popped from the large computer screen on an editing console. I worked as a local TV reporter for a national media. Peshawar was my workstation; the capital city of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa-one of the total four provinces of Pakistan. Just about three hours to the northeast of Peshawar, the hilly town of Mingora in Swat valley was under the Taliban siege. Walking by the small desk of my colleague, I stopped to take a look at the edit; a report sent from the valley was being translated into English for that night news bulletin. The girl spoke with a shaky voice. "I am very frightened," she said crisply. "Earlier, the situation was quite peaceful in Swat, but now it has worsened … Our siblings are terrified, and we cannot come to school." She spoke an Urdu of startling refinement for a rural child with Pashto being her native tongue. I asked my colleague, "Who is that girl?" "Malala," he replied.

Malala Yousafzai emerged on the media scene in the 9/11 context. The U.S. war machine mounted an attack on Afghanistan to dismantle the Afghan Taliban

regime for harboring Al-Qaida chief Osama bin Laden. By 2006, Al-Qaida relocated to Pakistan's erstwhile tribal areas (FATA, now called Merged Districts) bordering Afghanistan. This spilled terrorism over to mainland Pakistan. Swat valley was the first district to fall to the Al-Qaida inspired indigenous Taliban groups. A new wave of violence started: an average of two suicide-attacks each day for about three consecutive years (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2018). Total death tolls increased from 98 in the year 2006 to 507 in 2007, 670 in 2008, and 1221 in 2009 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2018). The start of a brief Taliban rule in Swat was followed by a ban on girls' education. "This ban affected about one hundred thousand students in the valley, including Malala, who was about to be promoted to the 6th class" (Ashraf & Jan, 2018, p. 453). She soon became a poster girl for the emerging story of Swat.

Malala becoming a goldmine for national and international media encouraged her to go global. Reflecting later, she said: "If there were no *BBC*, no NYT and no channels, then my voice would not have reached the people" (BBC Urdu, 2012). A local *BBC* reporter saw in her story Anne Frank, a diarist of Jewish origin who narrated her ordeal before being sent to concentration camp in the Second World War. Publishing Malala's anonymous diaries in late 2009, the *BBC* focused on sharing with its readers the pre-teenager's traumatic experiences of living in a war zone. At the same time the *NYT* hired me as a fixer to make a documentary on Malala. My fixer status allowed me to take every risk and compete with my *BBC* friend (we often met to discuss work), but it denied me institutional validation. Once the *NYT* released the documentary, I realized the risks I posed to the protagonist and myself. Therefore, I avoided taking a center stage in the sequel of the same documentary on Malala. My fears, however, were founded in 2012; the Al-Qaida inspired Taliban shot Malala in the head for her activism.

This paper is based on my experience as a fixer for global TV networks and a local journalist in Pakistan's militarized Pashtun Belt. While a few global media conglomerates control the channels of distribution and exhibition, the work of global news production is done by local reporters called fixers who are hired especially in conflict scenario to aid the visiting international journalists. Using the documentary as a case study, I offer my ethical perspective on global media coverage and my own role as a fixer before the attack on Malala. Was the pre-teen girl's defiance equivalent to "informed consent"? Was Malala capable of assessing the threat the video could pose to her life? Did the *NYT* commodify the child's defiant image for revenue and ratings? Such questions were asked everywhere back then. I want to take this discourse forward by questioning the 'fixer' itself as a role. My perspective shows how reporting from a marginalized status does not only jeopardize a news source security; it also challenges the ethics of the trade. By using Marxist framework, I provide a sketch of the role

(fixer) emerging parallel to the decontextualizing of local events, people and stories being reduced to fit the consumption patterns of free market economy.

It is not just an issue of de-contextualization or *de-professionalization* either. The local reporter's life is also put to risk. Over 40 Pashtun reporters have been killed in Pakistan since 2001. Many of them I knew as my colleagues. Because a lack of access has kept the world in dark about harrowing tales of the *WoT* in Pakistan's tribal areas, local reporters are the only reliable source placed in one of the most intense conflict zones stretching from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to its scenic valley of Swat. My perspective will show how riskily these journalists are plugged into the process of global news production.

The story of Swat

Militancy resurged in the scenic Swat valley in 2005, the year the local Taliban chief Molvi Fazlullah launched his illegal radio broadcast. The next year, Fazlullah's brother, Liaqat Ali, was killed in a U.S. drone strike over a religious seminary in FATA's Bajaur Agency. Over 84 other students were also killed in the strike. Riding on this revenge, Fazlullah became a leader of the new generation of the Taliban. By 2006, the U.S-funded military operations have reached its height in Pakistan's FATA, yet the Al- Qaida's relocation and networking continued. Fazlullah joined hands with Al-Qaida which made him the latter's local front man. (Later, Fazlullah became one of the most feared countrywide Taliban chiefs and was killed in a U.S drone strike in 2018).

I first spoke on the phone with Fazlullah in 2007. He openly threatened the Pakistani State and the U.S. military. I found the cleric to be a young explosive speaker. I thought he cut a figure similar to that of Father Coughlan, the 1930's American cleric who broadcast religious sermons that made him popular as a "radio-priest." This comparison even applied to Fazlullah's nickname; he was known as a "Rado Mullah" or "radio-priest." Knowing how to stay in news, this media-savvy cleric fixed a deadline of 15 January, threatening all the valley's girl students to stop going to schools. Some 400 schools existed in the valley enrolling 40,000 girls that suffered from the Taliban deadline; some had already received the Taliban threatening letters. Around 10 girls' schools were bombed before the deadline (Torwal, 2012). This led to my frequent visits to the Swat where I regularly interacted with Fazlullah who had unleashed a reign of terror carrying out organized violence. Not only he threatened girls' education, but he also had already begun to network with militant elements in adjacent districts, planning to march on Islamabad, the federal capital of the nuclear-armed Pakistan. Fazlullah's jihadi project rattled global security. As Swat was making headlines across the global media, the local reporters were in great demand to work as fixers with the visiting global media crew/journalists.

Fixers: The underbelly of global news production

The term fixer was coined in mid 1990s (fixer's antecedent term was stringer, a free-lance journalist paid by media organizations on linage basis) (Macdonald, 2008). This trade and role (fixer) was the outcome of the media networks dwindling revenue in the decade of 1990. Media networks removed their regular journalists, who had worked long-term in parts of the world and were replaced by the agile parachute journalists flown in and out of the war zone (Macdonald, 2008). Because the parachute reporter lacks local language skills, familiarity with places, and contacts in reporting on offshore conflict areas, filling the gap of experience makes them dependent on hiring local media workers as fixers (Hannerz, 2004; Palmer L. , 2019; Palmer & Fontan, 2007; Pendry, 2015). As fixer is placed in between logistical and editorial functions, an ambivalent work division follows, representing a reduction of native journalists with wider implications for local contribution to global news production. My fixer job, however, was not logistical, i.e., arranging taxis or hotel rooms for media crew. My work was editorial, i.e., sharing my local knowledge, ideas, and expertise. Yet, the reduction intrinsic to the job of fixer was my glass ceiling invalidating my agency and trade identity.

My interaction with a few global media outlets started mainly with the rise in the number of foreign journalists visiting the country following 9/11. Representing different global media networks, over 400 journalists thronged the region. Majority of them covered the war from Pakistan before leaving for Afghanistan, an estimate I collected as part of my Ph.D. research from a survey of hotels in Peshawar, Islamabad, Quetta as well as Jalalabad. Though all the journalists went back within a year after coverage of the attack, Pakistan's tribal bordering belt along Afghanistan still remained a global media flashpoint for years to come. It forced international journalists to keep coming back from time to time.

For me, fixer was a way to connect with global media's diverse audience. I took leave days or opted for extra work on my off days to work as fixer. This was also made possible by the peripheral status of Peshawar, the last border town only 50 miles away from the war- torn Afghanistan. Because headquarters of Pakistani and global media are concentrated in the country's urban centers, i.e., Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, Peshawar only has their decentralized bureau offices. Salaries of the local journalists' are also low and irregular. This makes side work quite common. The media owners do not like their regular local workers to do side work, but the lack of rules allows these reporters a space to negotiate this on their own. My work for the local/national media did not, therefore, obstruct my work as fixer. On the contrary, my local trade experiences reinforced my credentials to be a fixer.

The fixer: Marx's proletariat

As a local reporter, the information I shared with the parachute journalists helped them translate war-related local issues, i.e., public protests, speeches, into a global perspective. To my face, they avoided calling me fixer, but in talking to their own colleagues, I often overheard these Western journalists attributing my work to a fixer. Seeing my insights in stories gave me a sense of empowerment. There is something satisfying in knowing that your very specific local voice and the way you have filtered events to constitute news will reach a global audience and may create change—the real meaning of journalism. But I came to realize that capital holds the power to define the terms both for the nature of work and the terms of labor. Meagerly paid on a daily basis, fixers work more often without any authorial recognition. As indispensable part of the basic news investigation, they are essential part of the groundwork, but excluded from the story exactly at time when it is taking the form of a furnished cultural product, a position from where fixers cannot challenge editorial decisions. Nor can they make cultural capital. It reminded me of a letter Karl Marx wrote to his friend Friedrich Engels about his contract with a U.S.-based newspaper, *The Tribune*. Marx was required to submit two articles but was paid only for one in advance, i.e., he was expected to send two for the price of one. In case of the second article, the newspaper would only pay if they used it. Marx ([1857] 1980) wrote to Engels: "In spite of the very *amicable* tone it is evident that I have understood those gentlemen correctly […] In essence, they are reducing me to one half. Nevertheless, I am *agreeing to it* and *must agree to it*" (p. 93) (emphasis in original). It is exactly this demeaning and devaluing universal approach of capital that I investigate, taking fixer as a subject of Marxist structural analyses.

In the Marxist paradigm, labor is central to the capitalist mode of production, but cannot be reduced to the market mechanism of supply and demand (Wisman, 2013). While labor is socially necessary, capitalism turns human labor, and specifically labor time, into a commodity form to be used for its own accumulation: surplus capital. Marx, therefore, understood the extraction of capital as an inherently exploitative phenomenon under capitalism. Though Marx was a journalist himself, his labor theory has rarely been applied to news workers. Extensive literature is available to explain corporate media conglomerations amassing surplus production while using exploitative labor practices (Murrell, 2015; Palmer L. , 2019; Seo, 2014). A few studies extend Marx's framework to examine intellectual or media labor (Andrejevic, 2013; Fuchs, 2014; Huws, 2003; McChesney, 2008; Meehan, 1993; Miller, 2011; Mosco & Catherine, 2008). Local media workers (fixers) are one significant group still awaiting the application of Marx's theory. The deprivation—the absence of political and juridical rights—that fixer faces is largely common anywhere in the world, which makes them Marx's proletariats. As radical political economy instructs, it is the perspective of those who have nothing to

gain from preserving the system that we can learn essential truths about the systemic workings of oppressive powers, which otherwise appear unchangeable.

News Work in a State of War

I found the role fixer becoming valuable to media houses during the height of violence. The value of this work, in turn, is intrinsically tied to the fear of extinction. Representing a vulnerability imposed by the need to find work, it is fixer's perceived expendability, that is, the quality to render them profitable for global media. As violence normalizes risks for these workers, it also brings down wages, giving global media low cost access to on-the-ground news resources. There has been some attention to holding global media legally responsible for "the duty of care" (Pendry, 2015, p. 9), but local news workers' safety is rarely heard in commercial media discourses (Palmer L. , 2017). They are as much the structural outcome of fixer's abandoned status in working for corporate media as they could be associated with fixers' second-class citizen status in their own countries. It is not just an issue of *de-professionalization*. The local reporter's life is also put to risk without inviting any responsibility in return (Murrell, 2015).

A UNESCO communiqué noted that attacks on journalists are well known, but "less publicized is the fact that local journalists make up the bulk of those who are killed for doing journalism" (UNESCO, 2016). The report further maintains: "More than 700 journalists, media workers and social media producers who generate journalism have been killed during the past 10 years." Similarly, a recent UNESCO report (2019) elaborates that ninety three percent out of the total 1,109 journalists killed so far in the line of duty were local journalists and 90 percent of these cases went unresolved, an indication that almost perfect impunity exists in this regard. Associated Press (AP), one of the major global wire services, is another example that lost a maximum number of journalists from 1960s onward till now. "An overwhelming majority of them (18 out of 21) were…more likely to be locals and close to the action" (Seo, 2014, p. 9). This overview shows that those killed usually served in secondary role, as do contemporary fixers. Yet, most of them were not even owned by the trade for which they laid their lives, a cautionary tale of journalism I learnt from my reporting on the story of Swat.

How I became fixer for the NYT?

In 2008, a friend asked if I would meet an editor from *The NYT* who was already in Peshawar. The *NYT* wanted to hire a fixer to tell its audience the story of Swat. After I met the editor in the city's only four-star hotel, I found him interested in my insights on the war. While he kept his attention on me, I struggled initially. The visceral realty of war was powerful enough that hiding behind the mask of journalistic *objectivity* was difficult for me. Yet, I kept on performing 'neutrality', an effort to evade naked truth for fear of being rejected.

After I finished, the editor invited me to team up with the *NYT* parachute journalist, Adam Ellick. Like any other parachute journalist, Ellick hopped from one country to another. He had occasionally visited Pakistan before and was due this time to cover Swat.

Before examining this trade relationship, however, I want to make two clarifications. First, I was paid U.S. $100 per day from the *NYT* funds. As journalists don't pay fixer from their own pockets, my wages were as much a part of the organizational economy of the *NYT* as was my work a part of the daily's pages/website. Second, the insights I share came from my firsthand experience, a retrospective understanding of my work as fixer. Some quotes that I use are recalled from memory; others I had jotted down in my old news diaries, and a few details I retrieve from my email exchanges. While memory is never a perfect substitute for notes, I reproduce the events as faithfully as possible. Though I worked with different media networks, my longest association with the *NYT* was also the most draining one.

Fixer, Malala and *NYT*: A trinity

I met *the NYT* reporter Adam Ellick in mid-2008 in Islamabad. I showed him three written proposals in which he liked the idea of making a short documentary about girl's education in Swat. I had a protagonist in mind, a teenage daughter of my news source. I arranged a pre-production meeting in Peshawar to introduce the family to Ellick. I had to convince my news source that his daughter had an important message to share with the world. We all agreed to record the black day, February 15, 2009—a unique obscurantism in the Twenty-First century Pakistan.

Ellick and I knew that palpable coverage was not possible without the fixer taking risks. Visiting the valley from the outside was not a rational choice for foreign journalists because of the fear of the Taliban and the State's complicity. Also the local people were scared. I often found them hesitant to talk on camera. But once I switched off my camera, they often started talking fluently. This exercise was tiring. But the local reporters knew how to deal with this challenge. Motivating their news sources to speak up their minds, they usually took charge of the scene, a common practice back then. It was against this backdrop that I found my presence inevitable in the valley. I eventually devised an ambitious verbal plan with Ellick's approval.

My decision was not suicidal, though. Fazlullah was my news source. My direct access to him helped me remain in close touch. He was aware of my progressive ideas about girls' education. On my visits to Swat, I often sat with him at his madrassa and questioned his reactionary views on the topic. Fazlullah looked like any other ordinary militant armed with AK-47 assault rifle. But his measured rhetorical start in response to my questions often reflects as if he knows what is happening to the region. His response more often turned into a

vicious rant against the U.S. imperialism. Facing him was an intimidating task. I occasionally found young militants fuming with anger at what I critically asked the cleric about killing innocent people. But I did not want to push him too far. Asking questions had helped me get an idea of the limits of his tolerance. I noticed that my audacity earned me some respect in the second tier Taliban leadership.

A day before the deadline, I took a video journalist friend from Peshawar (Ellick paid for his work) and drove toward the valley. Disguising our identities, we passed through the hurdles without much trouble. As we traveled on unfamiliar routes, we found an eerie pre-dawn silence spread all over. The surrounding over-imposing mountains were setting a scary template in the pitched dark and windy night, a chilling experience with my heart kept racing all the way. A sudden assortment of piercing sounds shrilled through the valley's chilly breezes. Scores of *muezzins* began to ring out prayer calls at a high volume over mosques' loudspeakers. It felt like the valley knew we were coming. The eerie feelings continued until we reached our destination.

I called my news source, Ziauddin Yousafzai, but he was not welcoming. He seemed reluctant to let me in his house. I called Ellick in the *NYT's* guesthouse in Islamabad. Ellick and I agreed to continue pressuring Yousafzai to get the work done. From outside his door, I begged him to recognize the importance of the *NYT* project for his family and for the Swat people. My entreaties put him in a difficult position, but he eventually opened the door. I had to haggle for each shot and plead for access to the host's family members. One shot after another I continued, documenting the historic last day for girls' education in Swat.

It did not occur to me that I was unwittingly putting the lives of the host and his family at risk. Despite widespread fear among local individuals, collective resistance against the Taliban came from various sectors of the population and the Taliban didn't go after every individual, especially those having group backing or who were culturally sacrosanct such as children. Further, the teenage girl protagonist, one of the brave students about to lose her school, was firmly defiant and ready to speak up for her education right. My profound awareness of this convoluted scenario gave me the strength to move ahead and seize the moment. I wanted to make the best of my status as a fixer to utilize one of the world's leading corporate media platforms, the *New York Times*. I thought this project could contribute to rising global pressures being placed on the Pakistani State to look into the plight of Swat girls' education in particular and the militancy situation in general. After completing two rounds of stubborn on-site recording, I safely completed the work and drove back to Peshawar.

What if the documentary wins an award?

Over the next couple of days, I met Ellick at a guesthouse in Islamabad and delivered the videotapes. He was excited and asked, "What if the documentary

wins an award?" He was happy with my work and wanted to give me a co-producer title. Fixers getting such titles not as their right, but as a favor for which they are expected to be thankful to the employer, it is seen in literature on fixers as an employer's generosity. But it also means encouraging a fixer to put more heart in his efforts. A fixer sometimes may even lose his life falling prey to this generosity. I wanted to die for a better cause than just an award or title. "Highlighting the issue is more important," I remember responding to Ellick. To this day, I don't know why I did not see the risks involved in executing the project or attempt to get a contract with the *NYT* to establish my rights of authorship or at least ensure my name appeared on the documentary. My choice was clear to me: raising the issue of Education. But I did not know how grievously I would regret one day for taking this choice so over simplistically that it would cause me pain for long time to come.

The work of a fixer is precarious. Covering militarized violence is profitable for global media and it brought work opportunities to Pakistan but the local reporters taking these jobs worked under incredibly dangerous conditions. My colleagues often worried about their futures. Most bureau reporters working as fixers took on extra work at the height of the militancy, even if it meant exposing themselves to increased risks. Though the nature of the work required them to suppress their feelings, worries, and expectations, most of them wondered how they would find work once the war ended and if they would survive the daily killings. Perversely, they knew that the end of violence meant the end of work for them. In this bizarre situation, peace meant relative physical security but the risk of economic insecurity. I worked in these morbid conditions in which war seemed the only source of profit, but in view of the compelling constraints I was satisfied with my work. The co-producer title was gratifying. My labor, in the form of intellectual input, was at least verbally recognized and my larger social cause was being served. Needless to say, I was always also conscious of my status as fixer, a position in which making any demand could risk losing an assignment altogether. I felt I couldn't ask for more.

Sitting with Ellick that day, it also didn't occur to me that the story of the Taliban's destruction of schools would resonate with audiences around the world. I did not know then that this shared human concern would become an unprecedented opportunity to finally amplify unheard voices and push for local social change. Nor did I know that Malala Yousafzai, the *NYT* documentary's teenage protagonist, would later become a Nobel Laureate and our documentary would play a minor, but important, role in her winning this award. Many years later, Malala (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013) explained my unwanted arrival at her home in the following words:

> Adam [Ellick] could not come to Swat because it was too dangerous for foreigners. When Irfan and a cameraman arrived

> in Mingora, our uncle, who was staying with us, said over and over that it was too risky to have cameras in our house. My father also kept telling them to hide the cameras. But they had come a long way and it's hard for us as Pashtuns to refuse hospitality. Besides, my father knew this could be our megaphone to the outside world (p. 239).

Would anybody ever be interested to ask under what circumstances the documentary was shot? This question did not come up at any level at that time, but my role as fixer was obviously in sharp tussle with my gut feelings as local journalist.

Local violence, global messiah

Once the documentary was edited and released, Ellick kept me informed about its popularity. The documentary's imagined effects were powerfully troublesome for me. The graphic scene of a dismembered body, which was obtained from archival footage, showed the violence disconnected from the larger context of the ongoing global war and its relationship to the State as well as colonial history of the region. The fear and the madness reflected in the documentary were reinforced by dramatic scenes of violence carried out by armed militants that clearly projected a one-sided Orientalist view of "barbarian tribal people." The "Orient," according to Edward Said (1978), is seen as savage and this image obscures real conditions due to the region's special contextual place in the Western imaginary. Using such dogmatic lens often obscures local resistance to the systemic nature of global violence, while imposing meanings from the outside to give terrorism a dominant place in the depictions of local life.

Everything local took on a primitive character. This, in turn, I feared would inspire more militarization. As the war was prolonging, this aspect of violence was getting clear for me. The local form of global terrorism and its general portrayal in the Western media haunted me ever since, including the commercial success of the documentary and the popularity of its protagonist. I felt a premonition of imminent disaster, knowing well where this insane dance around the teenager is going to end. Do we need our kids to get martyred for our 'causes', follies and greed? Can't we see a better role for these children than to earn from flaunting their heroics as survivors? These feelings also rang in my writings and interviews on the topic (Ashraf, 2014; 2013; 2012; Ashraf & Jan, 2018; Lukitsch, 2015).

I obviously felt betrayed. My concern was not just limited to losing my sources among the militants or feeling unsafe for my life, which now was surely the case. In fact, my knowledge, skills, and purpose were all being used to work against my goals. Whether or not I knew what was being produced is not relevant to ask. Fixer is an indispensable part of piecemeal groundwork, yet

excluded from share in the furnished news product. S/he contributes to the organizational economy of media, yet relegated to an irregular organizational register. Her/his work, appearing on TV screen and newspaper pages, adds to organizational surplus of corporate media, but this contribution carries no institutional base and legal recognition. This double face of capital makes a worker status conscious. Whether my suggestions as a fixer would have mattered at all at the post-production stage was unclear to me, especially when Ellick sent me the project's script. But I surely would have stood up for my contribution had I been a part of the entire production process. Fixer, therefore, could not be blamed as a figure per se; instead, the role itself needs to be scrutinized. A reporter's exploitation starts exactly from his/her willingness to become part of this process of precarious labor reduction.

What I learned back then was an eye opener. The Taliban had withdrawn from the valley. The story of Swat had won enough audience for the *NYT* that Ellick came back to Pakistan to shoot a sequel showing jubilant Malala going back to School. As the nuances of my local journalism were no more needed, my co-producer position was overturned in the sequel. I felt like a spent force. Working spiritless is painful. I have to reinvent myself to continue to learn and understand the sensitivity of reporting from a position of deprivation. The experience of pain, itself, provides a basis for action, which in my case was to reach out to people with whom I shared the same sufferings and avoid taking any kind of refuge in performing 'objectivity'. The momentary helplessness that I felt could hardly stop me from learning from my work, a cautionary tale.

Had the effects of the cautionary tale been limited to me, I would have forgotten it long ago. But reporting from a subsidiary position carried consequences the nature of which is worth learning from. After the documentary's release, I emailed Ellick asking him about the graphic violence, which to me was overshadowing the documentary's context, limiting the violence to local actors only—the Taliban. Translating to me the stance of the *NYT* editorial staff, he responded: "…it is real life on public display for swat citizens. It is not the media using a gory scene to create drama, but it's the source- the Taliban- who put this stuff on display...". In other words, the world deserves to know the Taliban's cruel face. Was the Taliban's cruelty not a part of this larger scheme of U.S-fed regional militarization? Still living in Swat, my concern was the young girl. So bravely she fought for her education right that the corporate media made her a scapegoat to skip relevant questions, framing her as a direct challenge to the Taliban. And my fears came true; in 2012, the Fazlullah's Swat Taliban shot Malala for her activism.

Did the NYT Put Malala in harm's way?

This tragedy was breaking news on scores of screaming private TV channels in Pakistan and abroad. Those ethical questions, which were not raised before,

were now real widespread concerns and were being asked in media. In Pakistan, people even at street level held corporate media and their journalists responsible for putting bright young people in harm's way. I remember how I received a close friend's call, a fellow Pashtun Ph.D. student in the U.S. His first words were: "Jeney kho mo pa oveshta ka na," which means "you people (journalists) got her shot," but his trenchant words sounded to me as if saying, "you got her killed." I was myself a PhD student in the U.S. Imagine a foreign student and single parent of a pre-teen daughter struggling to reconcile with the first year of his Ph.D. studies and spending nights in underground university laboratory to adapt to a rigorous academic culture, receives a call from a friend reprimanding him for his role in taking away from a teenage girl her aspiring life. Words do violence. But how traumatic they could be, I did not realize it before.

Ellick called me the same day. We self-righteously discussed if our role had anything to do with the tragedy. We both tried to convince each other that activism was a choice. Malala could have avoided it, especially, when she was still inside the valley. Our discussion sounded as if the family had a choice to avoid the tragedy, but turning the tragedy into an opportunity was a temptation the cost of which we all paid. Our approach sounded a mutual face saving exercise. Ellick told me about an NYT-based neurosurgeon and a Nobel Laureate, who knew Malala from watching the documentary and offered to help her in receiving quality treatment in the U.S.

I did try to convince Ziauddin, sending him a message through a mutual journalist friend, but he did not agree with Ellick's proposal. Luckily, Malala survived because of successful initial operation in Pakistan and was taken out of the country for treatment in England, where she still lives due to the danger of going back home to permanently live in Swat. The *NYT* released a third mini-film in which Ellick, in his own voiceover, tried to analyze what led to the Swat Taliban attack on Malala. Here, I argue that the coverage did encourage her to take on the Taliban directly, something she was globally honored for even before she was shot. The arguments given in the third sequel *The Making of Malala* were surprisingly similar to what we had self-righteously discussed on the day Malala was shot. In Adam's reflexive voiceover, the documentary gave me the same commodified sense: to cash on Malala's story producing it like a neocolonial media text steeped in the Western civilization's savior complex.

Emotional labor in corporate media

A local reporter shares emotional bonds with the subjects of his or her reports. The value of local associations—people, space and place—defines emotional stakes of the reporter. These stakes not just challenge their self-control: keeping a straight face during emotionally charged moments. But they also potentially make a local reporter reflexive—to think through chaotic things as a mark of responsibility. But this labor also has another manipulative side to it: corporate

media business model. Journalist so often plays with the emotions of their news sources that this manipulation is often ignored in war reporting. In the process of co-producing the documentary, my failure to consider the fatal risks for all parties—my local host reporter, Malala and her family—never let me stay at ease. It constantly forces me to consciously revisit the past to learn from almost every cautionary tale in my work with corporate media.

I learnt that journalists must not transgress on the rights of others in pursuit of their editorial goals, even if what they seek is social change. Yet this is a mistake common in corporate media houses. In the pre-production phase, the *NYT* invited both Malala and Ziauddin to Islamabad to shoot background interviews in a guesthouse. At one point, Ellick took me aside and the instructions he gave me clearly sounded that he wanted me to make Malala emotional on camera. I knew that Malala was close to her father and I also knew that Ziauddin was the only income source for the family. The loss of her father would have been devastating for Malala, leaving her defenseless in a violent environment. No teenager should have to be asked such a question by a journalist about her father being taken. Still, I asked her, "What would you do if the Taliban came for your father at night with guns in hand?"

Working as a fixer, I took the pre-teenager's mind to the place of those nightmarish premonitions every child in Swat fears. I made her remember the Taliban's early morning ritual of decapitating dissenters and chopping their bodies into pieces, with torsos, limbs, and heads lying apart, hanging from poles. Children going to school would often see these dismembered bodies. One such slaughter site was a five-minute walk from Malala's school. I vividly remember the powerful lingering effects of this gory sight on local minds. At one point in shooting the documentary inside Swat, I asked Malala's teacher, a 25-year-old English graduate, "How does the situation affect your teaching?" An avid fan of Shakespeare and Keats, he was not a natural on camera. Still, I tried to stir his imagination with questions until finally he said, his voice ringing with pain, "How can I teach students the songs of love to match the beauty of Swat when every morning I pass beheaded naked bodies on my way to school?" He looked away with trembling lips, trying to hide his teary eyes twisted in the pain of his grimaced face.

Malala could not withstand the terror of what I triggered in her mind in my bid to invoke this brutal reality. I emphasized the possible use of violence against her loved ones and insisted on connecting this nightmarish situation with her burning pre-teenage desire to get education. It was a powerful tactic and my words flew like arrows, poison-tipped. Malala broke down, creating a cash moment for the *NYT* and its parachute journalist. Ellick swiftly zoomed in to catch the protagonist rubbing her weeping eyes with her hand. In Malala's own words:

> … Irfan asked me, 'What would you do if there comes a day when you can't go back to your valley and school?' I said this wouldn't happen. Then he insisted and I started to weep (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 238).

Her choice of the word 'insisted' obscures the violence of what happened at the interview site, a stage on which capital and labor were bound in a contradictory dialectical relationship.

Invoking my local knowledge to serve the cause of systematic violence, I acted as a fixer in the process of global news production, but even in this limited position, I contributed to the neoimperialist destruction of what was called the *war on terror.* Ellick, who encouraged me to play on every graphic detail I know about Swat, was convinced of the effectiveness of this art. We needed each other, though for different reasons. I sought to connect worries of the troubled Pashtun community—of which I am a part—to wider audiences to highlight the global violence with all of its contradictions. Ellick apparently sought professional recognition. Unlike Ellick, however, I could not escape the emotional fallouts of my role in this project.

Some existing scholarship examines journalists who live with guilt after committing war zone transgressions of omission and commission (Feinstein, 2006; Kramp & Weichert, 2014; Markham, 2011; Rodgers, 2012; Sullivan, 2006; Tumber & Webster, 2006). But all these research studies focus on the experiences of privileged Western correspondents who work for established global media outlets. Most visited a conflict zone and returned safely home, later suffering from post-traumatic effects, a sample representing small percentage of corporate media journalists reporting on wars. The bulk of the rest are local journalists. They have not been the focus of academic research for the very reasons this paper is trying to highlight.

Four years after the release of the mini documentary on Malala (Ellick & Ashraf, 2009), it won many awards including the prestigious Cinema for Peace Award in Berlin. I knew that the *NYT* and Ellick had found a goldmine in Malala's striding celebrity status and Malala also made no bones in accepting the *NYT* role in her projection. While the historical day in Swat became the signature evidence of this relationship, the labor of the fixer began to vanish into thin air. First, I noticed that the *NYT* website did not carry upfront my status as co-producer. The documentary only carried my name along with Ellick inside the visuals, obscuring my contribution altogether. The *NYT* used visuals of the deadline-day in its latter two sequels without giving credit to the fixer. Despite my concern about the tainted nature of our work, I decided to speak up for myself to be at least recognized in works where my credit was due. I emailed Ellick and the *NYT* editor who had hired me for the *NYT* in Peshawar. The latter said he had quit his job and the former said he had no access to the *NYT* website.

Later, the *NYT* merged the first two sequels and put my co-producer credits back on the cover. This hides and seeks might be unintentional, but the fact that the fixer is the victim of this neglect shows structural bias. The lesson I got was: the fixer work is a formal part of corporate media economy, yet his trade recognition, no matter how substantial/editorial that may be, will always be trivialized for lack of an organizational support, reducing his work to an informal status.

Watching a *YouTube* video of the Cinema for Peace Award, I found Ellick receiving the award clad in tuxedo (Ellick, 2013). He neither informed me of the award (he also won other awards for this particular project), nor mentioned my co-producer role in accepting it. In his speech, he called me a "courageous Pakistani journalist" who had shown "astonishing bravery" in helping him. Ellick also used the word "courageous" to describe me in his *NYT* blog (Ellick, 2013). Now, every time I hear a Western journalist calling a local reporter "courageous" or "intrepid," it sounds to me like bullying, a veneer of admiration covering haunting exploitation. I must emphasize that this traumatic form of violence stems from ongoing neo-colonialism and the superiority complex that justifies it. Ellick (2013), describing his own adventurous exploits in the brown men's world, said in his speech:

> "It was New Year's Eve in 2008. My first ever trip to Pakistan. I sat alone in an ugly guesthouse room wondering how my life come down to this. But I was also thinking how do I find important stories during this one-month assignment. The story (girls' education) I wanted the most…was also the most dangerous."

The preceding quote is not taken from a long conversation, in which a reporter might be excused for rambling on about his adventures. This quote is part of a three minute written speech explaining organized violence in a country Ellick knew very little about. Pakistan is a country where limbs and torsos literally fly in the streets; bombs and drones have been part of civilian life since the start of the U.S-led *war on terror*. While all this was happening, parachute reporters and foreign correspondents mostly stayed in the safe zone in Islamabad, from where they covered, through fixers, what Ellick called the "most dangerous" story of Swat, a battle site 250 km away from the *NYT* guesthouse in Islamabad. Were these secure spaces and posh places, it may be asked, *uglier* than deaths and destruction of the deadly neoimperial war?

Embodied experience: A takeaway

So far, I shared a painful, but necessary description of the risks taken, and the self-exploitation endured in using one's body, relationships, history, cultural memory, and intellect to feed the corporate media machine. My frequent use of the expressions "Western journalists" or "Western media" do not intend to

imply that they are all the same; they are not. I also don't blame any individual journalist. Nor could we hold the *NYT* responsible for all the problems of Pakistan. Invoking my self-reference was actually meant to call attention to the structures within which Ellick, the *NYT*, and I were caught. I aimed at revealing that fixer is not just a precarious labor in the production process of global news, but also a political role and objective condition as well as a subjective experience.

From this perspective, my description addresses five key themes. First, I wanted to reveal the tension between fixer as an exploitative role and a real field experience. Distinguishing real people from their fictional role, my reflexive approach was meant to identify a condescending culture in which the term is unethically couched. Carrying throughout this tension—between a role and a real fixer— the paper argues that the local journalist's transformation into a fixer is neither a choice, nor a role per se. It is a market function reinforced in academic and popular discourses. This function reduces local journalists to be used merely as embodied tools for fixing stories in news production process. Theorizing the role without examining its instrumental relationship with a local reporter's embodied experience, including hopes/expectations, runs the risk of reproducing corporate media power, subjecting professional ethics to surplus capital.

Second, I share how fixers' experiences are more powerful than an 'objective' view reproduced from nowhere. Reporting at a distance, i.e., war theatre, might perform journalistic *objectivity*, but this genre of conflict reporting defines what parachute journalists are. Destruction of the global war is obvious enough to tell the oppressors from the oppressed. One could clearly see the moral need to resist the use of this force that fueled the war with all its contradictions. Fixers, using their grounded experiences, access diverse voices, help in conceptualizing and executing the idea. Every aspect of their legwork is journalistic and, therefore, editorial in orientation. We should not forget that fixers in many countries are local journalists. Even if they are not, the skills that they use are common in journalism found in their respective localities that make their news experiences journalistic in essence. Yet, journalism, as a field, privileges regular journalists over fixers, revealing power and prestige not just delimiting field autonomy, but also discredit its conditions of possibilities. The story of Swat tells us not just about global war on local people; it also signifies the local reporter's struggle to resist being turned into the fixer, an effort to excel in the field connecting people to people.

Third, in this paper, I want to go beyond the fixer and correspondent bond. In academic literature on news production, this binary has trapped fixers in a correlation. Some academics examine fixers from the perspective of correspondents (Murrell, 2015), and others take the other way round (Palmer L.

, 2019). Both reinforce the same power structure that they claim to challenge. Discounting the local experience, both approaches turn fixers into faceless "team members," concealing their subjectivities and contributions. No insights into power relationship mean turning this binary into an exploitative category of cultural exchange—fixers and correspondents benefit from each other's distinctive background. Does it mean that both members of the binary belong to the same status? What seems so visceral and flagrant gets obscured in this oversimplification.

Fourth, reporting from a marginalized position carries emotional stake in reporting. Corporate media hire fixers to make their regular journalists' jobs secure, easier and affordable, but the very ability of capital to create this role shows how power, profit and prestige are dependent on expositing some people to risks and dangers. For instance, fixers generally hold themselves responsible for providing security to their employers (Palmer L. , 2019). This self-exploitation, creating undue expectations, leads to a culture of co-dependency, reinforcing fixers' precariousness. They live with the pain of regulating themselves to deliver the best. How I turned this position into my strength, and not guilt, is because I took this trauma as a moment in the learning process of awakening but am also aware of its downside—emotional labor.

Conclusion

My perspective is committed to Marx's proposition that people make history, but they may not make it the way they plan. One should make note of instances in which the ruling order co-opts an individual despite the latter's efforts to go a different way. I admit to my fallible inexperience in understanding the excruciating sensitiveness of war reporting, a personal challenge the nature of which I found not so personal in my fixer role. While journalistic work is intensely filled with a violent process of controlling meanings for commercial purposes, the rush of events makes this process a banal everyday unreflective activity. I was also conscious of the limitations of my trade position. But the inequality I faced as fixer and the violent plight of my own people also served the basis for my reflexivity, making my cause different from the *NYT*'s journalist. Life is open to interrogation; so are history-making practices. Self-reflection, as I am sharing in this essay, is an anti-essentialist practice, a way forward for change. The very act of directing one's thinking, writing, and action enables one to examine before challenging any form of power and capital. This reflexivity lays bare the context of one's actions, providing productive insight into conditions and roles in which a decision is taken.

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