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I started journalism in 1997. For over a decade and a half, I was a local journalist working with a National TV channel, Dawn News. I also worked with different foreign news networks as a fixer including the NYT. Along with doing practical journalism, I also started teaching at the department of Mass Communication, University of Peshawar in 2004 and went for Ph.D. to the U.S in 2012. I also remained an article writer for Pakistan leading English daily, Dawn. My journalistic work was mainly related to writing commentary and making TV packages on militancy and media in Pakistan's Pashtun tribal belt (FATA). In 2014, Syracuse University awarded me the Mirror Award for best commentary on legacy media. I was a co-producer of the award winning documentary on Malala titled "class dismissed".

This paper is part of my PhD research work at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

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AN ALTERNATIVE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE TO UNDERSTAND THE PERILS OF *OBJECTIVITY* IN DOING JOURNALISM IN THE CONFLICT-HIT PASHTUN BELT

Abstract

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Drawing on my trade experiences as a local journalist reporting on the Pashtun Belt—a war-torn Pak-Afghan borderland—this paper problematizes the concept of journalistic objectivity. Working for national and international media, local Pashtun reporters are the only source of connecting their war-torn ethnic community to the world. But reporting here poses a dilemma. Not only these journalists face threats from state and non-state actors, but adherence to objectivity also alienates them from their community. The paper argues that instrumental objectivity forces the local ethnic reporters to present news-data in a top-down fashion, and also hinders them from feeling the pain of their own community. Offering self-reflective approach as an alternative to conflict reporting, this paper gives primacy to occupational experience over technical rationality.

Key words: *FATA, Journalism, Objectivity, Pakistan, Ethnic reporters, War on terror.*

Introduction

Launched against Al-Qaida and the Taliban in 2001, the 'war on terror's' 'collateral damages' in Pakistan's bordering Pashtun areas have far exceeded the harm the militants have suffered so far (Ahmad, 2010). This bloodshed is widely reported in the national and international media in the wake of U.S.-operated drone strikes. However, the global media also need to have access to war-related information, which has made local Pashtun reporters uniquely important. But here is a catch. These ethnic reporters have to conform to impartiality represented by the journalistic notion of *objectivity*. The elements of 'impartiality' and 'neutrality' have become coercive tools forcing them to present their data in the shape of 'news' in a top-down style. This situation necessitates understanding *objectivity* not just a journalistic concept, but also an ideological framework. Seeking theoretical debate, this paper draws on my journalistic experience to suggest the need for an alternative approach. The point of departure of this paper—with focus on raising conceptual argument—is that institutional *objectivity* de-historicizes violence and forces local reporters to fulfill a technical and commercial criteria which renders them automatons and deprives them of their human and professional agency. These ethnic reporters, in their bid to stay neutral, not just avoid projecting their war-torn ethnic community as a social totality, but also reduce them to faceless statistics (data) waiting to be reported. This unique position needs critical outlook to evaluate local reporting practices in view of unchecked violence and high cost of human lives. This paper, therefore, argues that *objectivity* dissociates the local reporters from their sense of responsibility to feel the pain of their own troubled people, an effort to universalize reporting at the local cost.

The paper borrows from the vast reservoir of shared experience, both as a language and a method, to describe the essence of a journalist's experience. I am not merely participant observer; I am also member of the Pashtun community who suffered a harrowing string of suicide bombings on almost daily basis from 2007 to 2009. For the past 40 years the ethnic Pashtun community has been caught in the U.S-funded militarization that compels the local journalists to work in a state of war. I am a university teacher who lost a student to this militarized violence just a week after he sought my advice on how to stay safe while reporting. I am a professional journalist who has witnessed the falling of half a dozen colleagues at different times in the line of duty. I have also reported firsthand on drone strikes and bomb explosions in which hundreds of civilians were killed. Keeping in view these bonds of attachment, this paper looks at *objectivity* from a position. It does not posit a direct causal link between

Pashtun journalists and their *objective* coverage of violence. It also does not focus on the political economy of media. While both are vital aspects of the local journalism, however the aim of this paper is to describe the symbolic relationship between what we know as journalistic *objectivity* and its ramifications for the local journalists, reporting on the war-stricken Pashtuns. I also offer a way out by giving experience a primacy over technical rationality, *objectivity* of which is a historical outcome.

Media in the Pashtun Belt

From the majestic terrains of the erstwhile Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA)—a region straddling the British delineated Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan—the Pashtun Belt extends to the Indus River in the east that separates Pakhtunkhwa from the Punjab province. "Pashtuns are organized as a multi-tribal society with an estimated population of a combined 40 million in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Despite being widely spread in the two countries, the Pashtuns are strongly connected on communitarian grounds, making them a unique ethnicity in Pakistan. In this study, however, I limit the term "Pashtun Belt" to include only the Pashtun population living in the northwest of Pakistan—erstwhile FATA and Pakhtunkhwa province.

After the U.S.-led NATO attack on Afghanistan in 2001, Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters crossed over from the tribal FATA into different settled districts of the Pashtun Belt, which was followed by a web of U.S.-sponsored Pakistan military's operations. This turned the area into a site of imperial war, violence and 'news'. The escalation of violence coincided with the military dictator Pervez Musharraf government's media deregulation policy in 2002. Soon "over ninety TV channels licenses were issued to private entities, 28 foreign channels were given landing rights and as many as 106 FM radio stations were issued licenses" (Freedom House, 2011). With these developments, the number of journalists also multiplied. "Before 2002, about 2,000 journalists were working in Pakistan, which increased to around 20,000 in 2016, of which about 1,622 work in the Pashtun belt" (Pakistan Press Foundation, 2018).

Yet, the undeclared State policy continued to discourage Pashtuns to have their own means of representations. The political economy of electronic media took a non-Pashtun turn. "In 2004, for instance, the first Pashtu-language TV channel was opened in Islamabad by a non-Pashtun. In 2017, the only TV channel, Mashriq TV, was launched from Peshawar, but it is also owned by a non-Pashtun media baron" (Ashraf, 2018). Pashtun journalists, who reported on their own ethnic group, work for non-Pashtun electronic and print media based outside the conflict zone. Consequently, despite nationalization of the national airwaves, the powerful civil-military establishment, dominated by the majority Punjabi ethno-nationality, left no room for independent venues of local expressions. For the centralized state structure, the acceptability of the Pashtun journalists depends upon their willingness to avoid critical reporting—an oppositional form of journalism which speaks truth to power.

'Impartiality': A Canon of Local Journalism

Pakistan's structure of journalism offers an important case study where *objective* journalism rules journalists' preferences to prefer *facts* to context. "To know how Pakistani journalists perceive their trade identity", Nazir & Pintak (2013) found that an "overwhelming majority voiced their support for the idea that a journalist must always be objective but just over half said journalists should interpret events for the audience" (p. 656). As mainstream journalists follow *objectivity*, 'advocacy journalism' is disparaged in local journalism. Inversely, the value of attachment receives less recognition than the value of detachment.

Some scholars, however, are more skeptical of reporters who claim not to be advocates: the possibility is that they are almost always lying, whether they know it or not (Taibbi, 2013). Does it mean that all journalism is advocacy journalism? Journalists can strive to be neutral, but that's all it is: *striving*. In their bid to stay impartial, for example, the local Pashtun journalists avoid looking critically at terror; they do not link violence to any particular group or state institution unless a militant group or component of state institutions itself wants this link (Ashraf, 2017). Such queries raise the need to understand the existing conceptual apparatus defining the limits of field journalism wherein *partiality* is a professional sin and *impartiality* a virtue.

Objecting to *Objectivity*

Mindich (2000) considers *objectivity* as a conceptual framework in American journalism, dividing it into five components, i.e., "detachment, nonpartisanship, a style of writing called the 'inverted pyramid,' facticity, and balance" (p. 2). Mindich (2000) agrees with Schudson (1981) who believes that "the ground, on which both advocates and opponents of *objectivity* in journalism stand, is relativism, a belief in the arbitrariness of values, a sense of the 'hollow silence' of modernity, to which the ideal of *objectivity* has been one response" (p. 158). In this 'hollow silence', everything was distrustful and uncertain, and only science and its values were considered as a measuring rod to understand everything, a reason to block subjective approach in *objectivity*-driven reporting.

Objectivity is less the outcome of U.S. journalism than it is of the material conditions in which this concept emerged. Tracing *objectivity* to the emergence of commercial market in 1930's America, Mindich (2000) locates it ingrained in the body structure of Western supremacy. He argues that Western values are lying at the heart of the *objectivity* paradigm. Western style journalism, with its emphasis on *objectivity*, is not blameless. Its core values of detachment and adversarialism went through countless modifications and adaptations as "it travels across cultural boundaries" (Voltmer, 2013, p. 204).

Inside the U.S., even African-Americans argue that *objectivity* is an extension of racial supremacy. In her melancholy memoir entitled *Volunteer Slavery* (1994), Jill Nelson, the first black reporter who worked for the *Washington Post's* Sunday Magazine in 1986, initially thought she had entered the heaven of journalism. However, endless racially unbalanced reporting disillusioned her later. Considering *objectivity* a mythical concept to reinforce occupational hierarchy, Nelson (1994) urges African-American journalists to resist the "notion of objectivity," a notion she equated with a white voice representing contemporary global order—U.S. imperialism (p. 86).

The universal understanding of *objective* journalism, therefore, is not so universal: one style does not necessarily fit all. The operationalization of objectivity needs to be examined in non-Western contexts as well. A South African scholar Francis Nyamnjoh (2005) argues that the perception of individual as an autonomous agent in liberal democracy leads to the discouragement of his/her primary solidarities and cultural identities in favor of a national citizenship and culture. That is why, argues Nyamnjoh (2005), "media are expected to be disinterested, objective, balanced and fair in gathering, processing and disseminating news mainly because the assumption is that since all individuals have equal rights as citizens, there can be no justification for bias among journalists" (p. 38). But what about societies where interdependence on competing cultural solidarities are emphasized? In non-Western societies, where contours of formal institutions and organizations are not clearly defined to explain individual or institutional roles and responsibilities, "journalists and media are under constant internal and external pressures to promote the interests of the various groups competing for recognition and representation" (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 39). From here emerges *objectivity's* relationship with violence, especially in war reporting.

War Reporting: Shifting from *Objectivity* to Experience

The reporting of violence in journalism is the outcome of its representational priorities, a professional detachment and desire for *neutrality* that led Johan Galtung to develop two opposing modes of reporting wars i.e., "Peace or Conflict Journalism" and "War or Violence Journalism" (Hanitzsch, 2004, p. 484). Peace journalism examines contributory factors of a story and "can accomplish a significant role by inspiring journalists to portray disputes in a different manner than that to which they usually ascribe" (Peleg, 2006, p. 2). War journalism, on the other hand, exemplifies the perils of *objectivity*, reducing news reporting mainly to the coverage of two parties or combatants. The conflict is reduced to a binary system: one side is associated with firing a bullet and the other with receiving. Calling it *crisis journalism*, Hanitzsch (2004) interprets *War journalism* as a zero-sum game, which highlights only one aspect of the story. In *War journalism*, "news coverage only begins with the manifestation (outbreak) of violence and it only concentrates on visible consequences (Hanitzsch, 2004). Two critical points can be noted here. First, because a focus on two sides undermines a story's

less visible angles, obscuring not just the relations of production, but this pattern also appropriates the local reporter's role, dulling his/her sense of critically reporting on an issue. Second, adherence to *objectivity*, i.e., *neutrality*, non-partisanship and detachment cannot just be confined to a news text, they can also be understood as influencing a journalist's affiliation. These attributes of *objectivity*, I argue, carry out the objectification of a reporter's relationship with the site of occurrence. A reporter's role as a social actor is discouraged in the process of reporting due to which the site of occurrence cannot become a site of learning and reflectivity. The spatial objectification, therefore, seems also tantamount to the marginalization of the act of reporting, running the risk of reducing the local reporters to a mere body (with sensory instruments) or relay point at the site of tragedy/event.

Instead of detachment, a journalist's experience based on local affiliations, i.e., geographical and dmographical, could be used as a resource, especially, in local journalism (Ashraf, 2018). Schon (1983) explains two types of learning experiences—reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Both represent an aspect of practical knowledge processed by professionals, but usually overlooked. Initially, he develops his case by arguing that "our academic institutions place undue emphasis upon technical rationality—the disciplines of knowledge and the methods that are believed to make formal, prepositional knowledge reliable/valid independent of human consciousness" (Schon, 1983). With respect to human practices and action, Schon (1983) argues that emphasis on technical rationality (including *objectivity*) undermines practical knowledge of action, he calls "reflection-in-action." While this technology of experience could be a dangerous exercise in terms of his/her physical safety for a reporter caught in the throes of on-the-spot violence, a way out is reflection-on-action.

Reflection-on-action is what I actually mean by self-reflective practices after work completion. It means thinking through the events to make sense of the lesson learned. "We reflect *on* action, thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome" (Schon, 1983, p. 26). In reflection-on-action, a professional evaluates the worth of experience, in written form or otherwise. At the heart of learning through reflection-on-action lies the potential for a change of frame, helping a professional to review the available data differently. This is what I call the essence of my shared practical experience, an exercise which not only helped me in the process of reporting on my own ethnic community, but the absence of this exercise was, I argue, the downside of local journalism in the Pashtun Belt. Upon huddling back to our apartment shared by journalists or to a hotel room after the field-work, reporting on burned bodies, strewn lambs and obscene wretchedness wrought by drone strikes and suicide blasts, I noted down a pattern in my local colleagues' approach towards reporting. They usually avoided discussing events of the day. The common response often was: "let's discuss something else" or "we have got tired of doing all this all day long", or "what we are going to eat if the "war on terror" ends." This apparent reluctance was to escape going into a reflective bout about what they had seen in the field. At the peak of terrorism in 2007 in Swat valley, for example, media crew, consisting of international journalists and local reporters-cum-*fixers* mostly stayed in the colonial-style vice regal Swat Serena Hotel. This author used to be part of informal night sessions in hallways, hotel rooms, open verandas and the spacious hotel lawn. Despite these reporters' conscious efforts to announce once in a while "let's discuss something else," they could not avoid to discuss technical or organizational aspects of their work, i.e., how they covered stories according to 5Ws and 1H, argued with seniors back in Peshawar, or cameramen elaborating on how they grabbed 'exclusive' shots. At one level, discussing technical or organizational side of the reporting seems quite normal as this was what these reporters were recruited for, but at another level, technical obligations also seems to have seriously limited the journalists' in-depth engagement with themselves, their profession and their own local ethnic community. These assumptions are not without their practical consequences (see Ashraf, 2018). Therefore, a reflective experience i.e. reflection-on-action, by inviting a new wave of thinking to reflect on the data, opens up the mind to apply a different (dialectical) approach to understand the puzzling practical question: new frames have to be tested in new actions.

Central for the work of any professional, knowledge in these two given forms are subjective mainly because it appears in human consciousness, yet this knowledge also has an objective characteristic mainly because it also has a point of reference outside of human mind, an essence appearing in human

mind as an act of intentionality, a practical form of activity which professionals hold about their work in the process of *doing*. From this perspective, reflection-in-action rejects *objectivity* as a closed phenomenon complete in itself and independent of the influence of human mind. Rather, objectivity here means an act of intentionality, which could synthesize the outside (act) and the inside (mind), bringing them together on a continuum called human experience, a main trigger for reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

Just because the difference between technical rationality and self-reflective actions have invited objections for establishing dichotomy, which "separates thinking during practice from thinking after or before" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986, p. 194), does not mean that both concepts are irrelevant. "Reflection-on-action" is relevant in connection with local journalists' recollection of the traces of their engagement with their own community to describe events or to evaluate their work for making their stories better. Mind, being the warehouse of experiences, is capable of generating an internal dialogue, preparing the thinking journalist for "affective" action, a flurry of impulses to trigger self-reflective actions. In the absence of such reflexivity, however, the local reporters might find themselves obligated to negate their own subjectivity in a bid to develop strong relationship with hierarchical centers of military and economic powers to secure their salaries, ensure physical protection and maintain access to the conflict zone.

Working as a local reporter-cum-*fixer* from 2006 to 20012, a shared reporting experience that I had while working in the Pashtun Belt also supports the veracity of this theoretical argument. A fixer is a local reporter, often in a conflict zone, who is paid a daily wage by global media to perform the risky and essential work of reporting in a war zone. For a decade and a half, I reported for national and global TV networks, including significant work for The New York Times. While reporting on the suicide bombings and U.S. drone strikes that killed hundreds of innocent men, women, and children, I often narrowly escaped personal injury, danger, and death. After the horrifying scenes I witnessed in my work, I am a survivor, too. Using my shared experience as a methodological resource can help highlight aspects of the trade in need of our critical attention. I followed institutional rituals and news writing protocols—obligated by the cult of *objectivity*—that I found contributing to naturalizing violence as an ahistorical phenomenon, turning local reporters into unreflective automatons who function like sensors collecting data according to the algorithmic instructions of *objectivity*, and finally, attenuate reporters' human instinct of feeling the pain and suffering of their own ethnic groups. While this may not have much to do with objectivity, but excluding the local reporters from the process of news production, in the context of Pakistan, itself is rooted in distrust over local affiliations lest they may not pollute news/cultural artifacts. Based on discourses around technical rationality, including objectivity, such concerns are used not just as a powerful weapon for manipulating local reporters and snarling their agencies but a double benefactor to news production industries, while exposing local people as well as news sources to militarization and grave risks.

Reflective Journalism: A liberative concept?

Raising the conceptual issue of *objective* journalism in the local context of Pakistan, this paper offered my personal trade experience to plead that conceptual restrictions suppresses local perspectives in the domestic and global media coverage of local Pashtun communities. This limitation has serious consequences for the Pashtun community as an ethnicity in Pakistan. It reinforces the false narrative that the global form of ongoing militarized violence in the Pashtun Belt is all local in origin. In other words, the *objective* model of journalism is far too simple to help Pashtun journalists understand the intricacies of conflict reporting and their role as members of the troubled Pashtun community at the same time.

This paper also problematizes the extant local journalism (*objective*) model at two interdependent levels; it suggests making room for the individual journalists' agency and, making experience the center of the local reporters' self-reflections. This would help the local journalists, who are always close to the site of occurrence, to avoid ahistorical view of culture, society and conflicts and understand the pain of their own communities in any conflict scenario. The local journalists' interest/propensity

in/towards security centric approaches, or their lack of critical insights into the militarized nature of organized violence might carry commercial vitality, reinforced by their belief in *objectivity*, but the local reporters falling prey to ideological or commercial tendencies run the risk of swelling the community's image crisis. In the case of Pashtun reporters, for example, it is generally believed that too much focus on the already thickly militarized image of the Pashtun Belt has distanced the local community from the rest of the country. Physically, the troubled Pashtuns are living in Pakistan, but psychologically, they are yet to assimilate into the national whole.

One way of dealing with this challenge is to add the model discussed in this paper (Reflective Journalism) to the existing curriculum and field training courses for journalists. Besides teaching *neutrality* and detachment in educational institutes, Pashtun journalists—gripped entirely in reporting the blood and devastation of their own people and heartland— should also be taught to apply a new framework to effectively reflect on their community and think upon their professional role. The local reporters need to be conceptually trained and occupationally socialized in a way that valorizes their relationship with community so that they could value their experiences as the focus of their attention. This approach could lead to self-reflections, the purpose of which is to help adjust one's own human capacities to geographical and demographical affiliations without losing a thread of dialectical relationship with trade responsibilities. Otherwise, *objectivity* carries its own ideology. In the Pashtun Belt, for instance, "reporters consider their work limited to *objectively* writing a story based on a formulaic narrative style (inverted pyramid) of 5Ws (Who, What, When, Where, Why) and 1H (How)" (Ashraf, 2017). "Fulfilling these requirements relieve them of thinking beyond into the power politics involved in the making or distorting of conflict-related news. The challenge is not insecurity or threats from military and militants. But the issue is their own contentment" (Ashraf, 2018). Believing in the ahistorical culture helps them evade the complexities of power politics at the cost of reinforcing the existing conceptual confusions surrounding the geo-strategic and political economy of conflicts in Pashtun heartland. Reflective Journalism is a possible answer. The absence of any such approach contributes to militarization because of *objectivity's* focus on neutralizing the local journalists that risk over-focus on the warring parties, whether State or non-state elements.

Conclusion

This paper has offered an alternative perspective on the local journalists' use of *objectivity* model in reporting the "war on terror" in the Pashtun Belt. It has been shown how the invocation of self-reflective faculties can help journalists feel the community's pain which otherwise is discouraged by the *objective* structure of journalism. Conceptually, *objective* journalism creates a breach between the inside (reflectivity) and the outside (facticity) of a journalist, which tends to unconsciously alienate one from the other. Reflectivity, on the contrary, has the potential to liberate journalism by appealing to journalists' conscience, a quality that lies in unifying character of reflectivity. By confirming the outside of reality to the logic of inside overview, reflectivity of a reporter, i.e., reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action, can potentially make a reporter the object of self-scrutiny. Here lies a seed of resistance, a possibility for alternative or critical reporting. The local reporters can hold themselves accountable to outside pressures by bridging this gap between the inside and outside. Reflective experience in any of its form can engage journalists in a dialogue that is reflected through the choice of words and observation being recorded in the form of a story for the understanding of his/her community. Conceptual clarity is necessary to help local journalists understand that any model centering on instrumental *neutrality* and detachment has a tendency to create a gap between journalists and their sense of community membership. Professional routines guided by *objectivity* are so ritualistic that they are not developing the reflective capacity of the local journalists. Hence, the plight of their own community is not taken into account. Thus, majority of the local reporters simply follow *objective* journalism's prescriptions to report what they see or what is shown to them by the military or the militants.

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