

Straddlers not Spiralists: Critical Questions for Research on Fixers, Local-Foreign News Work, and Cross-Border Journalism

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To cite this article: Blacksin, I., & Mitra, S. (2023). Straddlers not spiralists: Critical questions for research on fixers, local-foreign news work, and cross-border journalism. *Journalism*, 14648849231183838.

Abstract

This article addresses current trends in the study of fixers and other forms of “local-foreign news work” through discussion of questions crucial to future investigations. Responding to Kotišová and Deuze’s call to complicate the existing “repertoire of concepts, theories, and epistemic categories” now in use in scholarship on fixing (2022: 1172), we provide theoretical frameworks relevant to, but thus far unutilized by, this important scholarship. Considering local-foreign news work as a process of straddling political, cultural, and epistemic boundaries allows us to overcome the limits of the conceptual binaries currently operating in the relevant scholarship, such as west and nonwest, local and foreign, fixer and journalist. By engaging the inherent liminality of local journalistic labor, this article brings into relief dynamics often obscured in current research, namely, the impact of race and gender identities, and the post-colonial contexts within which much local-foreign news work takes place. Attention to these dynamics challenges the conceptual divisions upon which many studies of cross-border journalism rely, while revealing the consequential – and boundary-defying – positionality of local news workers. Finally, examination of the “cosmopolitanism” of local-foreign news work, and of the “situatedness” of the knowledge produced by local news workers, serves to thicken scholarship on the topic in ways that deactivate essentialisms, deepen empirical foundations, and address problematic configurations of power critical to the study of news production today. By diversifying the research queries we pose, and the theoretical perspectives we employ, future research can better account for the dynamism of local-foreign news work in the contemporary global news landscape.

Keywords: fixers, foreign correspondents, international news, international journalism, cross-border journalism, trans-national journalism.

Introduction: A Labor Laid Bare

As international news bureaus hurried to close shop amidst the Taliban seizure of power in Kabul in August of 2021, global attention was drawn to the dangers faced by local news workers employed by foreign news organizations. A month earlier, CBS News, CNN, NBC Universal, the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and fifteen other news organizations had petitioned the US administration to help “those Afghans who have worked with the US media as journalists, interpreters, and support staff and now fear retaliation from the Taliban for having courageously associated themselves with the American press” (New York Times, 20 July

2021). On August 6, 2021, the *New York Times* published a story with the headline: “How News Organizations Got Afghan Colleagues Out of Kabul,” which offered an account of the hurried evacuations of Afghans who, by working for the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other international news organizations, now faced arrest or worse as a result of their professional activity (New York Times, 6 August 2021). The story of the scramble to provide evacuation flights or other contingency plans for local employees clarified not only the dangers facing local Afghan journalists but, as well, the scale of local assistance in international news bureaus.

The public visibility granted by these events to a mostly invisible labor force was, however, all too fleeting, and the self-congratulation of news organizations, after their efforts to aid local employees, was perhaps premature. As Al Jazeera noted, in a report from April 2022 titled, “Kill the rented journalists,” many local journalists and fixers who remained in Afghanistan found themselves vulnerable to Taliban retaliation for their work with foreign media personnel long after the fall of Kabul and the global attention thereto. “The recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban shines a light on the often exploitative relationship between Western foreign correspondents and the Afghan ‘fixers’ they leave behind” noted the report (Shajjan, 2022: np). Once again, circumstances in Afghanistan indicate the need for more than sporadic awareness of the labor of local journalists and fixers in cross-border reporting, and the continued necessity for information and analysis concerning the risks, uncertainties, and inequities baked into “local-foreign” journalistic collaborations (Hamilton and Jenner, 2004; Mitra and Paterson, 2019).¹

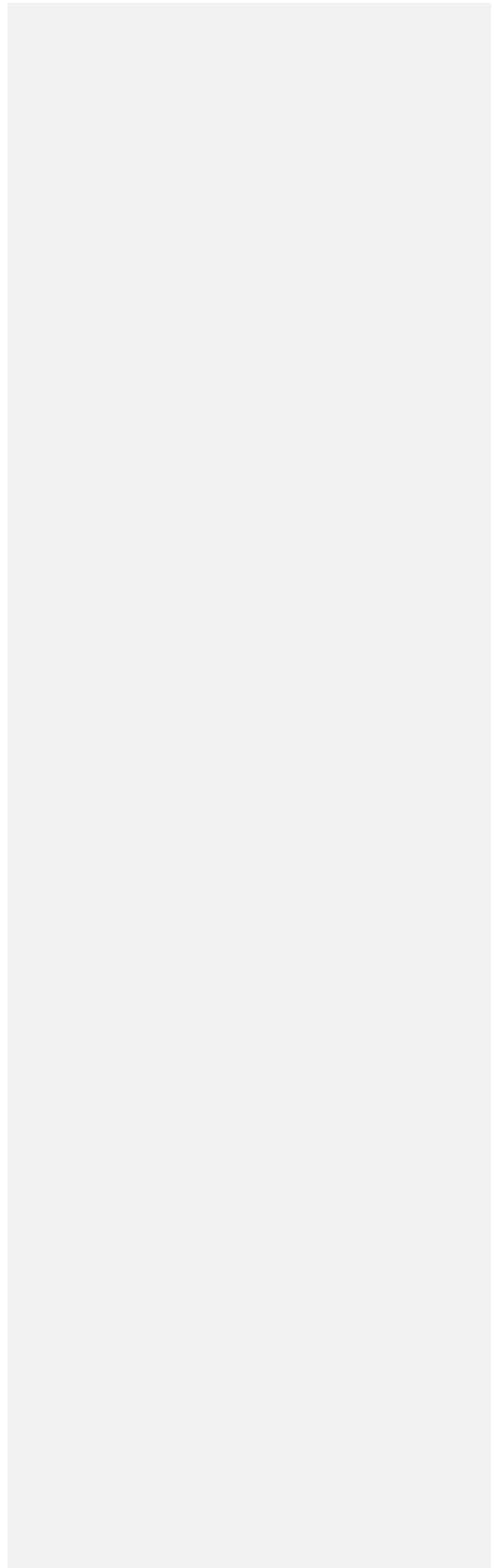
To its credit, academic scholarship over the last decade has become increasingly aware of the responsibility to assess the conditions of local-foreign news work. Strong evidence-based knowledge of the visible and invisible hierarchies ingrained within the arrangements of cross-border and trans-national news production can now be said to exist, such that we must no longer rely solely upon the self-reporting of news organizations. We need no longer depend, that is, on the narratives of news organizations concerning their role in “saving” those employees crucial to their own functioning, as robust scholarship allows us to recognize the important activity – and intense precarity – of fixers, producers, and other local media-workers within cross-border journalism.

Moreover, the recent expansion of scholarship on fixers and fixing can be understood to dovetail with ascendant concerns in journalism studies and communication scholarship broadly: The intertwinement of the local and global in the context of media-making; hierarchies and inequities in media practices, institutions, and professional cultures; the formal and informal circuits of media production and circulation; challenges – often from below – regarding claims to truth, authenticity, and objectivity. From a marginal topic of interest, local-foreign news work (often referred to as the study of news-fixers) is now increasingly recognized as a central issue in the study of cross-border journalism.²

¹ Recognizing that “fixing” can be an umbrella term for various types of journalistic as well as journalism-adjacent labor, conducted both by journalists and non-journalistic agents, we use the term “local-foreign” news work (Hamilton and Jenner, 2004) to refer to the labor of fixers and locally-based journalists who play a *professional* and *editorial* role within cross-border news production. We leave out discussions of the practice and implications of the growing convergence between activists and advocates on the one hand and cross-border journalists on the other. This particular area of research is well-traversed, and future research trajectories have been identified by Evans and Bebawi (2019), among others.

² For useful and up-to-date summaries of research on the topic to date see Palmer, 2019: 1-33; Mitra and Paterson, 2019: 1671-1678; Kotišová and Deuze 2022. The growing academic recognition of the importance of the role played by fixers in news production also extends to the subdiscipline of translation studies. In fact, translation studies provided one of the first theoretical frameworks for the investigation of the work of fixers (Palmer and Fontan, 2007; Amich, 2013; Çelik 2019). There is, today, a renewed effort to foster connections between journalism studies and translation studies (Valdeón, 2018; see also Palmer, J., 2020, and a recent special issue of *Journalism* on journalistic translation), and this site of interdisciplinarity could prove fruitful for the study of international news

production and especially local-foreign news work, as indicated by Lindsay Palmer's (2019) theorization of the work of fixers as cultural negotiators (see also Davier, 2015).



While this growing body of academic scholarship has gone some way in providing systematic analysis of the factors and forces at work in cross-border journalistic labor, recent criticisms have also laid bare the need for broadening and deepening our understanding of the work done by news fixers and other local media workers. This article aims to respond to current trends in the study of local-foreign news work through discussion of the questions critical, we believe, to future investigations of news fixers and related forms of journalistic labor. By diversifying the research queries we pose, and the theoretical perspectives we employ, future research can better account for the dynamism of local-foreign news work in the contemporary global news landscape.

Recognizing an Invisible Relationship

Now more than ever before, it is safe to assume recognition among scholars of journalism and international communication that the various types of invisible or “underground” journalistic labor (Palmer, 2019: 18) – often referred to simply as “fixing” – is integral to the practice of cross-border journalism. This category of labor, often undertaken on intensely precarious terms, encompasses information-sourcing and cultural mediation, logistics and security assessment, translation and interviewing, and even the production of primary news texts and images – often without any public or professional recognition (Palmer, 2019; Khan, M., 2020: 124-153).

Our understanding of the types of work involved in local-foreign journalistic collaborations is due largely to the wide-ranging scholarship that has become recently available through the efforts of dedicated scholars (e.g., Palmer 2019; Plaut & Klein, 2019; Arjomand, 2022). [This growing academic engagement is further reflected in the recent editions of communications research encyclopedia which carry entries on “fixers” and the work they do (e.g., *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Communication*, 2019) or acknowledges the role played by local news workers in discussions of foreign correspondence (e.g., *International Encyclopaedia of Journalism Studies*, 2019).]

Understanding the dynamics, stakes, and effects of local-foreign news-working arrangements is an ongoing process. The authors of a recently published meta-analysis of extant research on fixers note that the current scholarship “is still largely descriptive and exploratory and thus tends to reduce the richness and complexity of individual identities and network relations” (Kotířová and Deuze 2022: 1171). In response to Kotířová and Deuze’s call for “another architecture of knowledge production” to complicate the existing “repertoire of concepts, theories, and epistemic categories” now in use in scholarship on fixing (2022: 1172), this article provides theoretical frameworks relevant to, but thus far unutilized by, scholarship on local-foreign news work. These frameworks, we believe, can form the basis for inquiries crucial to the study of fixing now and in the future.

Our main contention in what follows is that by diversifying the research queries we pose, and deepening the theoretical perspectives we employ, future research can address the wider ramifications of the growth of local-foreign news work in the contemporary global news landscape. This research can, in turn, animate a thicker understanding of the dynamics of this important form of journalistic labor.

Straddlers, not Spiralists

Kotířová and Deuze (2022) argue that much research on news fixers suffers from a tendency to essentialize divisions between journalist and fixer, East and West, powerful and powerless, in its assessment of international news production. While recognition of such dichotomies can bring awareness to – and indeed challenge – the inequalities present in news fixing and other forms of local-foreign news work, the authors contend that this recognition can also naturalize those distinctions underwriting the power relations at work. The presumption of local news workers as

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inherently different and unequal from non-local news workers (“foreign correspondents,” to use a somewhat dated term) – even when motivated by a critical impulse – can ignore “the liminality, in-betweenness, hybridity and complexity of fixers’ identities” (Kotišová and Deuze 2022: 1161). By ignoring this hybridity, there results a failure to question, let alone disassemble, the latent power dynamics driving international news production today. Put otherwise, scholarly description of the sharp differences between local and foreign, powerful and powerless, journalist and fixer, displaces the ambivalence that characterizes local news work and, thereby, fails to deconstruct the way that power depends upon such differences for marginalizing competing orders of knowledge-making.

The critical intervention of Kotišová and Deuze’s (2022) provides a useful entry-point for discussion of the limits of the existing scholarship on local-foreign news work and the possibilities available for deepening future research. In this context, we believe it is useful to recall Hannerz’s (2004) distinction between two types of foreign correspondents: “spiralists,” on the move between places, and “settlers,” based long-term in a single locale. Local-foreign news workers do not fit neatly into either of these two typologies. Rather, locally-based journalists and news fixers who cater to distant audiences are better described as perpetual *straddlers*. We know from existing studies that local-foreign news workers navigate their identity as individuals with a doubled or even multitudinous sense of cultural belonging (Palmer, 2019). But this cultural polyvalence is accompanied by the multi-spatial nature of these individuals’ professional experience (Hellmueller and Berglez, 2022), as their work conducted through embodied, lived, and relational acts.

Empirical work with local-foreign news workers in diverse settings have time and again found this multi-spatial dynamic central to their journalistic labor (e.g., Khan, M. 2020; Moon, 2019; Mitra, 2020). The informative, civic, and dialogic role played by local-foreign news workers can be recognized as acts of lived citizenship which have political import in, and impact on, more than one place. Understanding citizenship in a globalized and inclusive manner – as a lived, relational act – is gaining currency within the citizenship studies discipline (Kallio et al., 2020). Adopting it for understandings of local-foreign news work marks a departure from the normatively statist, or territorialized, concept of citizenship which can be said to underpin journalism studies broadly (Ward, 2015: 142; cf. Kallio et al., 2020). Using terms proposed by Hellmueller in her analytical model of transnational journalism, we argue that fixers and others working in cross-border journalism need to be understood as operating between or among different polities and distinct national, regional, and professional cultures in the “evaluative,” “cognitive,” and “performative” aspects of their work (2017: 12). The descriptive hermeneutic of *straddling* accounts for both the political role and everyday civic agency of news fixers and local journalists working as professionals in and across multiple polities (Couldry, 2010: 68), as well as their cultural polyvalence as translators, mediators, and communicators. Moreover, the notion of *straddling* illuminates the socio-cultural, economic, and vocational liminality local-foreign news workers consistently navigate.

Considering local-foreign news work as a process of straddling political, cultural, and epistemic boundaries allows us to grapple with both the power and constraints of the conceptual binaries currently operating in much cross-border journalism research, and in a manner that acknowledges these binaries as imposed rather than natural, as subject to contention rather than self-evidently masterful. As well, engagement with the in-betweenness of local-foreign news work brings into relief several dynamics that the essentialism of much relevant scholarship tends to obscure, namely, the impact of race and gender identities, and the post-colonial contexts within which much local-foreign news work takes place. Attention to these dynamics opens the way for accounts of the boundary-defying positionality of local-foreign news workers. Finally, examination of what we refer to as the “cosmopolitanism” of local-foreign news work, and of the “situatedness” of the knowledge produced by local news works, serves to thicken scholarship on the topic in ways that deactivate essentialisms, deepen empirical foundations, and address

problematic configurations of power critical to the study of news media today.

Building on recent research, this article identifies questions critical for the study of local-foreign news work. These questions, in turn, unfold theoretical paradigms that can both account for the liminality of local-foreign news work and indeed allow that liminality to animate new understandings of the cross-border journalism production.

Questioning Borders: Transnational and Transcultural Labor

A primary lacuna in the existing scholarship on local-foreign news work is one that researchers engaged in large-scale studies have themselves noted: the overwhelming Anglophone bias in studies conducted to date (Plaut and Klein, 2019; Palmer, 2019).³ As Palmer (2019: 33) indicates, this bias arises not from the participants of internationally comparative studies – the local news workers who hail from very many different linguistic and cultural spaces – but from the Anglophone basis of the investigations of local-foreign news work. When it comes to other major cross-continental languages (e.g., transnational Hispanophone or Francophone contexts), as well as other languages in which an increasing amount of cross-border journalism takes place (e.g., Chinese and Russian), our understanding of local-foreign news work remains weak. Addressing this conceptual gap, can help fulfill the radical potential of concentrating on “the local” in investigating journalism indicated by Willems (2014: 15-17), wherein the cross-cultural trajectories being studied can resist the hierarchical and myopic arrangements of past scholarly focus.

This linguistic limitation in existing studies of local-foreign news work exists even as the journalism studies field is rapidly diversifying the cross-border contexts it investigates. Consider that investigations of cross-border journalism by Chinese government-backed news media in sub-Saharan African countries is now a growing area of study (Wu, 2013; Wasserman, 2016).⁴ These studies range from assessment of the international growth of Chinese state news agency Xinhua (Xin, 2009), to analyses of the footprint of CCTV International on the continent (Jiang et al., 2016), to critical accounts of journalist training in Africa (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2018), to examinations of journalistic role perceptions of Chinese journalists in sub-Saharan Africa producing Chinese-language news (Ojo, 2020). It is safe to assume that local-foreign news work is being conducted across sub-Saharan Africa by those working in Chinese-language news production, yet current research on “foreign correspondence” in Anglophone African countries (e.g., Nothias, 2020) as well as non-Anglophone African countries (e.g., Frère, 2022) are silent on the topic. Another pertinent example of Anglophone research bias concerns Russian-language international news production. While the Middle East has long been a central site for studies of local-foreign news work (e.g., Bishara 2012; Murrell, 2015; Blacksin 2019; Arjomand 2022), the growth of Russian media in that region – and the subsequent employment of a local labor force – has received correspondingly less attention.

Difficulties of access to particular labor markets can skew scholarship toward Anglophone contexts. Lack of researcher access to Chinese and Russian journalistic enterprises remain acute. Arjomand, in an ethnographic study of fixers in Istanbul, notes a frustrating inability to access local workers for Chinese and Russian media organizations despite the prominence of such organizations in the sites of his fieldwork, an obstacle Arjomand ascribes to the “separate labor networks for different national media” (2022: 6). Despite the wide scope of the existing internationally comparative studies of local-foreign news work (Palmer, 2019; Plaut and Klein, 2019), we have little evidentiary basis from which to understand the patterns and

³ One exception is Skrubbeltrang’s (2015) study of fixers in the Middle East who worked with Danish foreign correspondents. Arjomand (2022) and Blacksin (2019) also engage fixers working with French, Indian, and Japanese foreign journalists.

⁴ See Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2018) for an up-to-date typology of Chinese media presence, policies, and practices in sub-Saharan African countries.

relationships of journalistic labor happening between or apart from Anglophone contexts. Future investigations must remain aware of the reality that current and future local-foreign news work might not involve the Anglophone world at all. Diversifying the geocultural scope of such investigations remains indispensable.

The above examples indicate types of local-foreign news work thus far absent from existing research. Hellmueller and Berglez, moreover, argue that the study of journalism taking place across borders should move from a “traditional” understanding of foreign or international journalism as nation-centric or place-based practices, to more innovative conceptualizations of global or transnational journalism marked by fluidity and flexible ‘spaces’-based approaches (2022: 10). This adjustment can in turn help problematize reigning notions of identity and power-relations within local-foreign news work, since nation-centric views of international journalism tend to ignore or obscure the inherently *boundary-defying* nature of such work, performed to mediate between cultural, linguistic, and class differences that exist across social, regional, and national divides.

By opening our analyses of local-foreign new-work to perspectives unhindered by nation-centric understandings of cross-border journalism (Archetti, 2019; Hellmueller and Berglez, 2022), future investigations can take more seriously the mediation between places and peoples, and the attendant negotiation of meaning, essential to local-foreign news work.⁵

Questioning Identity: The Impact of Race and Gender

Another major gap in the existing scholarship on local-foreign news work concerns the identities of local news workers and what these identities allow, constrain, and structure. Attention to dynamics of race and gender as they intersect with the practical, institutional, and epistemic dimensions of local-foreign news work can help to overcome apparent limitations in the relevant scholarship. As Kotišová and Deuze note, much of the scholarship on fixing tends to focus on “content, finance, and safety” (2022: 1764-70) and thereby overlooks dynamics structural to fixers’ identities (2022: 1172). Among other ways that individuals’ identities can be critically queried, race and gender dynamics are especially generative for future research.

Such dynamics have become a robust site of inquiry in journalism studies broadly, yet little of this important scholarship has been brought to bear on discussions of local-foreign news work. From Richardson’s (2021) study of Black witnessing, which examines a tradition of minority witness-bearing in contest with the hegemonic vision of global news networks, to Palmer and Melki’s (2018) study of female war reporters, in which practical considerations of risk and access are shown to be inflected through gender identity, studies of race and gender can provide a critical lens for investigating how news workers are interpolated within the mechanisms of news institutions and their attendant protocols of professionalism. This lens can be generatively applied to local-foreign news work. Scholarly inquiry attentive to race and gender is adept at demonstrating not only how a particular subject position is permeated by hybridity and transformation but, as well, how such a position might cultivate its own forms of knowledge-making, forms able to contest or bypass more dominant orders (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Blacksin, 2022; Mitra et al., 2021). At the same time, gendered and racial identities can delimit the

⁵ News-fixers and regionally-based journalists also facilitate news production for metropolitan journalists in culturally and linguistically diverse regions. It is noteworthy that studies by Zárate-Valderrama (2016) in Colombia and Hoiby (2020) in Philippine, on regional journalists’ relationships with metropolitan peers (from Bogotá and Manila, respectively), show distinct parallels with the tensions between foreign journalists and locally-based fixers and journalists. These two studies also go some way to demonstrating that while geographically large countries like Brazil or Nigeria would be the most readily assumed sites for studies of local-*national* news work, geographical size or linguistic diversity may not be the key determinants for identifying the richest areas for future investigations of such news work. Other types of regional disparities – socio-cultural access, economic differences, relative higher incidences of violence in one part of a country versus another – can make local-national news work an important area for discussion of the tensions within nationally-oriented news production processes.

type of news that fixers and other local-foreign news workers are tasked to produce (Palmer and Melki, 2018; Mitra et al., 2022). In its conceptual potential and its practical implications, consideration of race and gender provides a basis for questioning and thereby undermining naturalized divisions and accepted essentialisms, and for discovering the affordances offered by particular subjectivities for contending with the inequalities such essentialisms inscribe.

Accounting for the hierarchies of local-foreign news work means grappling with structures of identity as they articulate, and are articulated by, the “scattered hegemonies” of international news production (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994). Some initial groundwork has been laid in the study local-foreign news work for analyses of race (e.g., Banks, 2017) and gender (e.g., Palmer, 2019: 102-4), as well their consequential intersectionality (e.g., Mitra et al., 2022), and the studies conducted thus far do demonstrate that inequalities in local-foreign news-working arrangements are often refracted through the intersecting rubrics of race and gender. Scholarship attuned to the dynamics and effects of embodied forms of identity thus offer an important resource for understanding the material and epistemic conditions of local labor in cross-border news production. Yet much more work needs to be done. Prioritizing racial and gendered experiences, and the intersections thereof, can help to retain the critical force of future scholarship on local-foreign news work, while increased focus on the negotiated identities of local-foreign news workers will sharpen understandings of how cross-border journalism is produced and to what effect.

Questioning Epistemologies: A Postcolonial Perspective

Attention to racial and gendered dynamics in the study of local-foreign news work entails a confrontation with how power is negotiated by media-workers in the field more broadly. Expanding this important focus on power and its impact means tarrying with the effects of neocolonial relations on the practical, institutional, and cultural dynamics of international news production, which often takes place in sites of former colonial enterprise (Moyo, 2022; Mutsvauro et al., 2018; Nothias, 2020). As Kotišová and Deuze (2022) note, recent turns in postcolonial scholarship remain largely absent from studies of local-foreign news work, despite the colonial histories of so many of the sites of prominent international news production (Bunce, 2010; 2011). Given scholarly emphasis on the inequities of local-foreign news work, and a growing awareness of the colonial contexts thereof (Seo, 2016; Khan, A. 2019; Plaut and Klein, 2019; Baloch and Andresen, 2020; Khan, M., 2020), postcolonial studies suggests itself as a useful yet underappreciated toolkit for drawing out the power relations attendant to the production of cross-border journalism. While postcolonial theory has informed studies of communication broadly (e.g., Shome and Hegde, 2002; Gunaratne, 2010; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014; Shome, 2016), apart from isolated anthropological and sociological studies of journalism practice (e.g., Pedelty, 1995), this theoretical approach – with the exception of the occasional uptake of the foundational work of Edward Said (e.g., in Khan, A., 2019; Mitra, 2020; Mitra et al., 2021) – has not been adequately applied to local-foreign news work specifically.

A recent theoretical turn in postcolonial scholarship seems especially helpful in centering the *epistemological* dimensions of local-foreign news work and the inequities revealed therein. The “decolonial epistemology” theory of Walter D. Mignolo (2011) and others (e.g., Bhabra 2014; Grosfoguel, 2007; Quijano, 2000) provide a means to elucidate the dominant forms of knowledge inherent to much international news and the strategic value of local knowledge for contesting media hegemonies. This theoretical approach demonstrates how a certain epistemic territory designates modernity’s horizon of intelligibility, a territory delimited and upheld by colonial power relations past and present (Mignolo, 2011; Vázquez, 2011). As modernity’s epistemic territory, colonially-structured, enforces the parameters of intelligibility broadly, so can international news be understood to enforce the parameters of legibility for foreign events, displacing competing claims to truth.

As Blacksin (2019) demonstrates, international news is determined not by a single language or a single site of production and distribution but by a hegemonic economy of truth operating across languages and national borders, and which produces media bounded not by geography but by the professional practices, reigning ideologies, and generic conventions of local-foreign news work. The theory of decolonial epistemology can help to illuminate the specifically *representational* capacities offered by local news workers in contest with historically and culturally dominant models of news-truth. This theoretical paradigm, then, and the broader orientations of postcolonial scholarship in which it is embedded, demonstrates the epistemological stakes of local participation in international news-making.

Kotišová and Deuze urge an updated utilization of postcolonial scholarship in the studies of fixers in order to address “fixers’ complex identities” and examine “all-important power vectors” (2022: 1161). Matters of identity, however, are but one of the dimensions of local-foreign news work to which theories of postcoloniality are suited. Decolonial epistemology emphasizes the contestations of knowledge under conditions of post- and neo-colonialism, enabling, as Shome and Hegde (2002) demand, more socially sensitive investigations of communication and representation. Foregrounding the power relations inherent to knowledge production in future investigations local-foreign news work can help refine our understanding of such labor practices and help us to conceptualize more equitable processes of cross-border news-making.

Questioning Epistemologies: Situated and Embodied Knowledge

Postcolonial theory provides one way to achieve “less hegemonic, less dualistic and West-centric repertoire of concepts, theories, and epistemic categories” in the study of local-foreign news work (Kotišová and Deuze, 2002: 1172). A similarly sensitive, and similarly focused, theoretical approach is provided by feminist studies of knowledge. Here, the turn to standpoint theory and analysis of “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988, 1994) entail a more diverse and less reductive lens for examining power relations in knowledge production, a lens attentive to the risks of East-West essentialisms and attuned to the gendered, racialized, and classed dynamics of knowledge-making (Mohanty et al., 1991; Collins, 1991; Harding, 2003).

The use of feminist theory in studies of communication (e.g., Liao, 2006; Halpern, 2019; Hartouni, 1997) has yet to be vigorously applied in studies of local-foreign news work. Feminist theory, in its concern with the flow of power through institutions of knowledge production, can help to identify possibilities for challenging dominant forms of knowledge in news-making – forms designed for “convertibility, mobility of meanings, and universality” – through attention to the positionality of local news workers, whose “situated knowledge” can be understood as premised upon partiality, specificity, and difference (Haraway 1988: 580; see also Durham, 1998). As Blacksin argues in an ethnographic study of fixers in the Middle East, the knowledge of local news workers is often “rooted in the specific local contexts that journalists must generalize for a faraway audience,” and this knowledge thus offers a challenge to the “globally legible, internationally marketable, authoritative meaning” of international news (2019: 12). Feminist theories of knowledge can foreground the structural inequities of cross-border news production while excavating possibilities for making knowledge otherwise.

The turn to affect theory in journalism studies (e.g., Beckett and Deuze 2016; Papacharissi 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013, 2019; Kotišová, 2019; Stupart, 2021; Moran and Usher, 2021; Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021) provides a related conceptual scaffolding for assessing how the embodied and positioned nature of news making can impact the culture of journalism and the news produced. Here again, this “affective turn” has yet to be robustly applied to local-foreign news work. As Al-Ghazzi (2021) argues in an account of Syrian media producers, attention to affective dynamics helps to contextualize the unequal power relations that frame the roles, relations, and modes of representation of conflict journalism. Al-Ghazzi’s discussion of

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“affective proximity” (see also Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Wetherell, 2013) emphasizes the position of media practitioners as experiencers of the events they report, and demonstrates how an intensification of intimacy – as for locals producing news of conflict in their own countries and communities – illuminates consequential differences in the cultures and institutions of journalism.

The emphasis on affective dynamics, like the approach to “situated knowledges” in feminist theory, cuts through distinctions between “truth” and “falsity” in news production to the matter of relationality between news and news worker, and to the ways that dominant knowledge regimes marginalize the impact of such relations. Attention to affect indicates how the normative structures of international news production, which dismiss emotion as bias, tend to reduce an embodied practice to an intellectual endeavor and a relationally entangled enterprise to a neutral and distanced one. Engagement with affect, embodiment, and epistemic “situatedness” returns the representor to the represented, the subject to the object, the us to the them, and thereby recenters a web of relations denied but never disappeared by the professional journalistic norms of objectivity, balance, and distance. Revealed, in this case, is the difference localness can make and the affordances attendant to any particular positionality in news production.

The turn to affect and embodiment, as to epistemological context, does not, however, automatically privilege the “view from below.” Rather, consideration of subject position and its impact in local-foreign news work allows for critical examination of *all* positions from which news is made, regardless of access to power or presumption of bias. With attention to relationality in news-making – colonial, gendered, racialized, emotional, geographic, and otherwise – comes a sharpening of responsibility in accounting for the ways news production is *always* imbricated in a logic of power, a logic that is contestable and indeed actively contested. This responsibility applies to the affectively proximate local as it does to the distanced “objective” foreigner. By engaging with the work of power through a consideration of subject position, news-making, following Haraway, can be understood not to “depend on a logic of ‘discovery’ but on a power-charged social relation of ‘conversation.’ The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder” (1988: 593). Scholars can heed the embodied, affective, and epistemic particularities of local-foreign news work for building theories of how meanings get made and the role of subjectivity in this making. This can be accomplished not in order to deny the reality of meanings or predetermine the role of subjectivities, but in order to create meanings and empower subjectivities that respond to demands for equity, justice, and respect.

As journalism studies renews its focus on objectivity, legibility, authenticity, and related epistemic dimensions of news-making in light of recent global shifts (e.g., Moran and Usher, 2021; Winston and Winston, 2021), postcolonial and feminist theories offer productive avenues for analyzing how the positionality of local news workers intersects with the hegemonic knowledge regimes of international news institutions. We have already noted how examination of the distinctions between local and foreign, fixer and journalist, powerful and powerless, risks re-inscription of the very inequalities much research on local-foreign news work aims to contest (Kotišová and Deuze, 2022; Arjomand, 2022). Feminist theories of situated knowledge and postcolonial theories of decolonial epistemology can help to foreground power relations over fixed identities, illuminating the shifting positionality of local news workers and the critical awareness these positions bring to news production.

Emphasis on the epistemological dynamics of local-foreign news work, however, must also account for the forces and factors that constitute the transnational field of this form of news production. Specifically, posing questions about the cosmopolitan capitals this globalized, cross-border field rewards, and that its agents sanctify, allows the embedded inequities of local-foreign news work to be clarified politically and sociologically.

Questioning the Field: Cosmopolitan Concerns

Attention to race, gender, and (neo)colonial dynamics in the study of local-foreign news work opens the way for a more precise rendering of the “identity markers” of fixers and other local-foreign news workers (Kotířová and Deuze, 2022: 1172). These dynamics can be approached as part of a “broader constellation of constitutive and descriptive elements” (ibid) in cross-border journalism. Furthermore, investigating the social and cultural capitals leveraged by fixers and local journalists within cross border journalism can deepen our critical inquiries into the inequities that are both structural to, and constitutive of, the field of journalistic practice within which such news-work operates. More than one recent study of local-foreign news work has used sociological analysis of social and cultural capitals at play within the professional field of journalism to investigate this particular form of cultural labor (e.g., Murrell, 2015; Moon, 2019; Mitra et al., 2022).⁶

Moon has demonstrated how fixers’ labor “can be thought of as belonging to two fields of journalism: they physically inhabit a journalism field in geographic space, while at the same time producing content that meets the expectations of a field located elsewhere” (2019: 1717). She describes the cognitive and performative labor conducted by local-foreign news workers as “field-bridging work” (2019: 1716). The tension between belonging and not-belonging within a single, coherent “field” – a field contiguous to one socio-political context – can be understood as one of the defining elements of local-foreign news work. Such work, once again, requires *straddlers* – those of multiple spaces, societies, languages, cultures, positions, politics – and indicates the usefulness of a comprehensive post-Bourdieuian framework for assessing the border-defying nature of the local-foreign news work.⁷ The inherently trans-spatial nature of this field suggests that the very concept of “field,” in the context of cross-border journalism and its associated practices, requires recognition of a “cosmopolitan sensibility” (Beck, 2000; 2004) able to account for “a pluralistic vision of belonging” in order to investigate “the possibility of occupying different social positions in relation to different national societies” by a single agent occupying said field (Nedelcu, 2012: 15; see also Beck, 2000: 74-5; Hannerz, 2004: 20-24).

At the same time, utilizing cosmopolitanism, and cosmopolitan capital, as an analytical basis for the field of local-foreign news work necessitates consideration of the geocultural and geopolitical inequities that persist within this form of labor, as discussed above. Our argument for an awareness of cosmopolitanization within a post-Bourdieuian theoretical framework arises from a finding consistent across contextually distinct studies of local-foreign news work: the ability to act as linguistic, professional, and cultural mediators between peoples, places, and politics is an attribute prized among local-foreign news workers.⁸ This ability is both intrinsic (i.e., it is often part of the “habitus” of the local individual employed in cross-border journalism) as well as a skill honed professionally by individual workers in the cognitive, evaluative, and performative aspects of their day-to-day news work (Hellmueller, 2017; Murrell, 2015; Mitra, 2017; Palmer, 2019; Khan, M., 2020). Taken together, the various forms of cultural and social capital – both embodied and symbolic – seen as essential for local-foreign news works can be theorized as cosmopolitan capital, a “resource that individuals draw upon in order to gain or maintain their social positions” in the profession of cross-border journalism (Lindell and Danielsson, 2017: 54; see also Lindell and Karlsson, 2016; Mitra et al., 2022; Hellmueller and

⁶ See also Bourdieu 1980; 1986; 1993; 2005.

⁷ There is already some very important work done to conceptualise such a global field in the case of photojournalism by Solaroli (2015, 2016). Unfortunately, the ‘global’ in this current model somehow excludes everywhere outside Europe and North America for the moment (see Solaroli, 2016: 51-53; 58-61).

⁸ i.e. “banal,” (Beck, 2004: 134): individual, and everyday practices of cosmopolitanism.

Commented [SM3]: I took the liberty of reinstating the Solaroli reference and critique in the footnote here. The idea, and a model, for a post-Bourdieuian framework for cross-border photojournalism as proposed by Solaroli, and its limitations, I think is important to mark here. I am hoping some of the other reductions I have suggested can help offset the word limit problem I have just exacerbated. I also added back in a truncated version of the earlier footnote about cosmopolitanisation and banal cosmopolitanism. This is to hopefully forestall a reviewer understanding cosmopolitanism in a certain way and attacking the argument here based on that.

Berglez, 2022: 10-11).

Future studies can gain both empirical and theoretical advantage by recognizing the dynamics of cosmopolitan capital necessary for local-foreign news workers to accumulate, cultivate, and leverage. Empirically, questions concerning who is assigned the role of consecrating agents and institutions within the field of cross-border journalism beg for more thorough exploration. (Given that academic institutions, and the journalism pedagogy offered therein, themselves function as consecrating agents, future scholarship will also require a healthy dose of reflexivity.) Theoretically, an understanding of the mechanisms through which historically privileged agents and institutions maintain the doxa of the field of local-foreign news work will allow for a thicker account of power in the operations of cross-border journalism. Such considerations will serve to complement ongoing discussion of the economic and political hierarchies in the transnational news landscape while bringing into view the mechanisms of epistemological hierarchy operating even in the relatively cosmopolitanized profession of local-foreign news work.

Finally, attention to cosmopolitan capitalism can account for Kotišová and Deuze's (2022) criticism of studies of local-foreign news work as proceeding without an evidentiary basis for assumed East-West, North-South divides. For the geocultural and geopolitical schisms persisting in the cosmopolitanized and cosmopolitanizing configurations of local-foreign news work can be clarified upon investigation, and their evidentiary basis laid bare. Both empirically and theoretically, then, future investigations that approach local-foreign news work through a post-Bourdieuian, transnational perspective can provide a more holistic view of the inequities attendant to such work, placing the inequalities in "content, finance and safety," consistently remarked upon in recent studies (Kotišová and Deuze, 2022), within a broader frame.⁹ In this manner, inquiry into the precarity of fixers and local journalists – whether in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Ethiopia, or indeed in the United States – will only gain in its critical force.

A Plea for Diversification

While we have taken care to include a range of perspectives in formulating questions critical for the future study of local-foreign news work, we yet remain limited by our own linguistic and scholarly capacities. This article, then, is constrained by the same Anglophone bias discussed above. It is inevitable that studies capable of enriching our intervention, published in languages other than our own, have escaped notice. Moreover, our critical inquiry into research on local-foreign news work, driven by an overview of theoretical possibilities, cannot claim comprehensiveness. The primary aim of this article is to capture – from our singular position – a snapshot of what we believe to be an important academic dialogue, ongoing among a diverse group of news researchers and practitioners, and to highlight the limits, opportunities, and challenges thereof.

This primary aim unfolds another: to map the next phase of research into local-foreign news work by offering lines of questioning we believe crucial to the expansion of this important body of scholarship. While our intervention may prove useful to those actively engaged in researching this form of journalistic labor, its implications, and its impact, we also hope to inspire others to join and indeed broaden the ongoing inquiry into local-foreign news work in ways we have been heretofore unable to conceive.

The ultimate purpose of this article, then, is to engage a community of researchers that cuts across as many cultural, political, and conceptual contexts as possible, thereby diversifying the geopolitical, epistemological, and indeed disciplinary standpoints from which the study of local-foreign news work has thus far progressed. Raising and responding to the questions critical

⁹ For example, a recent study from Ashraf and Phelan (2022) does much to contribute to theoretical understandings of fixer precarity and indeed exploitation, but their intervention does not push beyond the normative topics outlined by Kotišová and Deuze (2022).

to our current understanding of local-foreign news work will become easier when, not if, this diversification comes to be.

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