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Murrell, Colleen - *Foreign Correspondents and International Newsgathering: The Role of Fixers*, Routledge Research in Journalism New York: Routledge. 2015, ISBN: 978-0-415-73335-9 (hbk) ISBN: 978-1-315-84847-1 (ebk)

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In international newsgathering, especially in war zones, audiences believe it's all about the role of the foreign correspondent – but actually it's not. There are some others who play a major role in the process of newsgathering and production – they are called 'fixers'.

In her book *Foreign Correspondents and International Newsgathering: The role of fixers*, Colleen Murrell, a former international journalist and now an academic, comprehensively and thoroughly addresses the role of the 'fixers'. The study is constructed on the basis of case studies and in-depth interviews with fixers and foreign correspondents. Murrell points out to the lack of knowledge about the role 'the fixers' play. She comments:

“ The correspondents and media companies all know this, but this has not been common knowledge for the public or for most scholars conducting research in international news (p.155). ”

The fixers – mostly of them local journalists – are the hidden face of international newsgathering. The 'heroic foreign correspondent' – an image deeply engraved in people's imagination – would not be able to carry his or her work without the fixers' knowledge and understanding of the local reality. They are the unsung heroes of international journalism.

The fixers provide the foreign correspondent a wide range of services such as translations, getting sources, arranging interviews and driving foreign correspondent around. According to my own experience in Pakistan, most fixers are paid well below the payment a foreign correspondent receives. And the risk is higher. While most foreign correspondents will avoid dangerous places, it is the role of the fixers to 'get out' and get quotes.

This excellent and timely book is divided in eight cohesive chapters. In the first chapter the author summarises the available literature regarding foreign correspondents. It is a summary that will be useful to scholars and media students alike. Regarding the literature review, the author points out:

“ This review of literature concerning how globalization affects the way media companies operate at a macro level is important to study of foreign correspondents. From a cultural standpoint, transnational correspondents may increasingly need to see themselves as working in a new global (micro) spheres in companies such as CNNI, Al-Jazeera and BBC (p. 8). ”

Murrell highlights and covers fundamental aspects such as globalization, hegemony of news agencies, cultural and media imperialism, citizen journalism and use of social media. She applies and discusses key theoretical approaches to international newsgathering, devising a framework for examining journalists that has developed from the field of the sociology of journalism.

In this chapter, Murrell also discusses the very common and blurred question regarding foreign correspondents' role in modern journalism. She writes:

“ Over the past few years, scholars of international news, journalists and media executives have been examining the question 'Are foreign correspondents are redundant?' However, in 2015 our televisions, newspapers and online news site reveal that these reporters are still playing a significant role in mediating overseas news for viewers and readers (p.1). ”

The second chapter highlights the culture of foreign correspondents. Murrell analyses autobiographies of prominent journalists who shared their experiences of reporting overseas. She underlines a very harsh truth about foreign correspondents' unprofessional attitude to fixers. The author points out that reporters always put themselves at the centre of stage of narrative. She writes:

“ These reporters are the heroes of their own myth-making, which necessitates that their role be that of lone explorer in foreign lands. From this position of economic and editorial power, they are able to select other people with whom to work, on either an ad-hoc basis or on longer contracts. These people are some time acknowledged as useful but are mostly shown to be in a subservient group of helpers or assistants (p. 32). ”

In this chapter Murrell examines the changing culture of foreign correspondents in modern journalism. She rises some very important points about this.

“ If 'going native' is no longer a 'professional sin', then employing local people to be the resident correspondents can be a possible, logical consequence. This would imply a real change in the way that foreign news is delivered over the long term, if it is delivered by someone for whom the news isn't 'foreign' but is in fact 'local' (p. 40). ”

The third chapter examines the methodology used to produce this study, a very useful section for anybody engaged in academic research. The author conducted in-depth interviews with 20 foreign correspondents, all of whom admitted and highlighted the importance of fixers in the field through their experiences. Murrell cites foreign correspondent Tim Palmer (former ABC correspondent in Jerusalem and Jakarta), who modestly suggests that 90 percent of what correspondents achieve is due to the work done by a fixer. In the interviews, foreign correspondents recognise that the role of the fixers is not just that of a facilitator but also their editorial role. This is an important finding of the research because normally fixers are seen as only *facilitators* in terms of language, logistics and contacts.

The fourth and fifth chapters cover the importance of the fixers in the field and how to use them effectively. The sixth and seventh examine case studies of Iraq and Indonesia, both of which have different environments. It is a useful comparison to better understand the role of fixers in both war zones and under normal conditions.

One area that it is missing in this study is an historical background of fixers in the field of journalism – how and why have they emerged? Answers to these questions would add context and understanding of their role. The author could also have interviewed non-English language international reporters as a useful comparison. It would also have been interesting to know about their working conditions – are they provided with similar working conditions enjoyed by Western foreign correspondents?

The author interviewed only five fixers, and they are the central topic of this book. However, perhaps the scope of the sample could have been widened. The fixers interviewed are from Iraq and Indonesia. Countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, African countries, China, Russia, and Latin American countries have a different environment for fixers. In countries like Russia, China and some Arab countries, how fixers do carry out their work?

One another note – and this is something the author of this review has experienced – it is well known that some fixers have provided to foreign correspondents fake information, sources and even incorrect (willingly or unwillingly) translations. There have been cases where incidents have been manufactured. Perhaps this is a

theme for a follow up of Colleen Murrell's superb study.

About the reviewer

Majid Khan is a Pakistani journalist and lecturer of documentary production and journalism at National University of Modern Languages, in Islamabad. Majid holds a MA (Documentary) University of Bedfordshire, UK. He is a PhD candidate at the RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia.