Unreported Realities: The Political Economy of Media-Sourced Data

Sarah E. Parkinson
Aronson Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies
Johns Hopkins University
sparkinson@jhu.edu

ORCID: 0000-0003-0789-2040

Accepted for publication at American Political Science Review, October 2023

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank, first and foremost, the journalists who agreed to interviews as well as Mera J. Bakr for his excellent research assistance. Kanisha Bond, Valérie de Koeijer, Kristine Eck, Jacqueline Hazelton, Anita R. Gohdes, Milli Lake, Richard Nielsen, Evann G. Smith, and three anonymous reviewers provided constructive and incisive feedback on the ideas in this letter. The Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani and its Executive Director, Mac Skelton, provided an intellectual home and practical support in Iraqi Kurdistan. The author developed concepts in this letter while co-authoring a manuscript with Thomas Vargas and Benjamin Bagozzi; she benefitted immensely from their insights and expertise. The Johns Hopkins University’s Nitze School of Advanced International Studies and an Exploration of Practical Ethics grant from the Bloomberg School of Public Health’s Berman Institute of Bioethics funded fieldwork. All mistakes remain the author’s.

Abstract

What is the gap between scholars’ expectations of media-sourced data and the realities those data actually represent? This letter elucidates the data generation process (DGP) that undergirds media-sourced data: journalistic reporting. It uses semi-structured interviews with 15 journalists to analyze how media actors decide what and how to report—in other words, the “why” of reporting specific events to the exclusion of others—as well as how the larger professional, economic, and political contexts in which journalists operate shape the material scholars treat as data. The letter thus centers “unreported realities:” the fact that media-derived data reflect reporters’ locations, identities, capacities, and outlet priorities, rather than providing a representative sample of ongoing events. In doing so, it reveals variations in the consistency and constancy of reporting that produce unacknowledged, difficult-to-identify biases in media-sourced data that are not directionally predictable.
Unreported Realities: The Political Economy of Media-Sourced Data

Introduction

News media is a staple data source for social scientists. While scholars commonly use journalistic reporting to assemble data on event occurrence (e.g., protests), casualty numbers, actors’ narratives, and government actions (see, e.g., Davenport and Ball 2002; Tilly 2005), its use has not been without significant critique (Davenport 2009; Gohdes and Price 2013; Miller et al. 2022; Dietrich and Eck 2020; Dawkins 2021; Wang et al. 2016; Snyder and Kelly 1977; Ben Hammou, Powell, and Sellers 2023). Scholars identify numerous sources of systemic bias: regime type influences media coverage (Baum and Zhukov 2015); large-scale protest events are more likely to be reported than small-scale events (Oliver and Meyer 1999); more violent events are more likely to receive coverage (Hendrix and Salehyan 2012); and geographic location influences reports of human rights abuses (Caliendo, Gibney, and Payne 1999). Journalists note that their identities influence stories they choose and are able to report (al-Sharif 2019; Hassan 2019, 101). Arjomand (2022) demonstrates how foreign journalists’ relationships with local fixers shape possibilities for access and the level of detail in reporting.¹ Yet researchers continue to rely on media-sourced data without appropriate caveats, overstating the robustness of results and underestimating the political and economic factors that shape the data generation process (DGP).

This letter elucidates the political economy of journalistic reporting as an overlooked, central element of the DGP of media-sourced data. It analyzes how journalists decide what and

---

¹ Fixing “includes bringing sources and reporters into physical or virtual proximity, preparing them to interact, translating, and guiding each one’s interpretations of information gleaned from the interaction” (Arjomand 2022, 51).
how to report—the “why” of reporting specific events to the exclusion of others—and how the larger professional, economic, and political contexts in which they operate shape coverage. It reveals broad, contingent variation in the consistency and constancy of reporting and heavily context-dependent dynamics. It thus underscores the “unreported realities” media-derived data represent: reporters’ locations, identities, capacities, relationships, outlet priorities, and need to place stories in competitive media markets, rather than a representative or systematic sample of ongoing events. These realities suggest caveats to current research as well as opportunities for future research.

**Going to the Source: Methodology**

Dietrich and Eck (2020) note that most prior examinations of media-based DGPs have focused on within-country comparisons of scholar-coded data (Loyle, Sullivan, and Davenport 2014; Weidmann 2016). Most of these studies take a macro approach while acknowledging that they do not address the micro- and meso-level of journalist and media outlet behavior. This letter complements such work using original data from 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with journalists working in the Middle East and Africa to illustrate how the media production process and the industry at large shape the material that scholars code as data. Most interviews occurred in 2018 and 2019; all respondents asked to remain anonymous and are quoted with permission. Journalists worked in both print and multimedia for international and regional English-language

---

2 See Dawkins (2021) on South Sudan for a notable exception.

3 Research conducted under IRB Protocols HIRB00007471 and HIRB00010101 at Johns Hopkins University. Please see Supplemental Appendix for methodological details.
media outlets. Half of the interviewees simultaneously or had previously worked for local media in a regional language (e.g., Arabic, Sorani); others had worked for non-English language international outlets. Interviewees were or had worked as editors, producers, correspondents, stringers, freelancers, and fixers. Some focused exclusively on the Middle East or Africa while others moved between contexts. Additionally, the researcher analyzed over a year of activity on the Syrian Democratic Forces’ WhatsApp group for English-language journalists, recent first-person accounts of reporting, secondary sources such as the Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), research in communications and media studies, and reports from organizations such as the Reuters Institute at Oxford and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

**Consistency and Constancy**

Two erroneous assumptions about media reporting, particularly in the context of events data compilations, have theoretical and empirical implications for how researchers understand both the size and direction of bias in the DGP and its political nature. These persist despite some acknowledgement that the DGP varies across contexts in initial reporting—e.g. depending on press freedom—and which sources scholars use—e.g., if there are reliable local media outlets.⁴

First, end users tend to assume *consistency in reporting* across domestic and international contexts. For example, if there is a civil war in Syria, and a civil war in Iraq, beliefs that urban bias affects both cases in the same way often lead scholars to proceed as though coverage of violent events will be comparatively reliable in Damascus and Baghdad and coverage in al-Hasaka or Ninewa will be comparatively lacking.

⁴ See, e.g., the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s (UCDP’s) methodology.
Second, end users tend to assume \textit{constancy in reporting}, or that that journalists cover the same types of events in similar ways with stable rates of attention. Yet journalists operate in dynamic environments and change reporting approaches over relatively short periods of time.\footnote{UCDP and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) both note non-random variation in coverage.} The assumption that journalists cover the same types of events, gather \textit{and report} the same level of detail, and remain in those spaces for similarly significant amounts of time is thus nontrivial. Dorff, Henry, and Ley (2023) demonstrate, for example, that Mexican journalists have decreased the specificity of their reporting on organized crime given an uptick in violence against media. The obvious implication is that an urban protest in Mexico in 2021 may be reported very differently than the same class of event if it occurred in Mexico in 2011 or in Venezuela in 2021.

\textit{If a tree falls in the forest...}

The salience of variability in ground-level journalistic presence grows further as outlets commit fewer resources to overseas reporting and rely on reporters who “parachute” in only to cover specific events (Khalaf 2019, 259; Arjomand 2022, 1–3). Between 1998 and 2010, 18 US newspapers and two chains closed their overseas bureaus (Enda 2011). Martin (2012) notes that while publications such as the \textit{Washington Post} and the \textit{Los Angeles Times} maintained foreign bureaus, they were frequently staffed by a single person who was responsible for huge swaths of territory. He observes: “One \textit{Washington} Post reporter, Sudarsan Raghavan in Nairobi, is listed as the paper’s ‘bureau chief in Africa.’ Raghavan is the chief of a bureau of one in Kenya. For the
continent of Africa.”

Schwartz (2018) corroborates this trend in noting the closure of *Foreign Policy*’s overseas bureaus.

Risks to journalists also shape coverage holes, particularly where safety concerns or legal means constrain press freedom. For example, Agence France Press ceased deploying journalists to rebel-held areas in Syria and stopped accepting freelance work from such regions to disincentivize extremely risky reporting. The Committee to Protect Journalists’ data demonstrates a clear upwards trend in the imprisonment of journalists since 1992 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022)(see also: Gohdes and Carey 2017; Carey and Gohdes 2021). Both factors depress the number of journalists on the ground and the likelihood of events being reported (Armoudian 2016, 2–3).

Inconsistent rates of reporting and variability in coverage depth may be inevitable implications here: overstretched journalists in precarious positions cannot equally cover each country or region on their beats. They constantly make choices about which stories to pursue, in what level of detail, and are increasingly likely to miss even major events. Clarke (2021, 1, 7) identifies bias in both the consistency and constancy of cross-national and sub-national data that results. Specifically, he demonstrates that protest datasets built from local-language sources in the Middle East “identify considerably more events than most off-the-shelf datasets” and that there is wide variation in the differences between Arabic-language sources and popular event datasets (e.g., ACLED, SCAD, NAVCO) with respect to the events reported in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria,

---

6 After Jeff Bezos bought the *Washington Post* in 2013, the paper undertook a significant hiring effort that included international bureaus. It expanded in 2020 to 26 foreign bureaus (WashPostPR 2020). The *Post* is largely an exception to overarching trends.
and Iraq. Yet freelancers and those working for local media often do not have the same resources as well-funded and protected correspondents.⁷

*Reporting as a tight-rope act*

Fluid states of access and proximity shape reporters’ ability to identify stories, reach locations, interview participants, and publish, creating biases in data. Journalists’ relationships with key actors influence what they do and do not report. For example, during interviews the researcher conducted in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), multiple journalists relayed that other journalists threw parties for members of the country’s military elite, which granted them special access and increased the chances that the journalists involved might avoid reporting on embarrassing issues such as government human rights violations.⁸ Sasha, a freelancer with extensive local experience, emphasized the self-preservation bias that drove many publication decisions: “a lot of journalists here...close their eyes so that they can maintain access.”⁹ Tariq, a producer for a major TV network, showed the researcher WhatsApp groups where members of the country’s security sector elite sent tips to reporters; he specified that given time, security, and resource constraints, some reporters took their stories and quotes directly from the feed.¹⁰ Government manipulation of the press is nothing new; during the Cold War, for example, many foreign news outlets relied on a Moscow-based fixer with known KGB connections, who fed journalists both true stories and propaganda on behalf of the USSR (Arjomand 2022, 48).

---

⁷ Interview with Hoshang, 2019.


⁹ Interview with Sasha, 2019.

¹⁰ Interview with Tariq, 2019.
Journalists may also be restricted by political conditions or safety concerns that can vary unpredictably (Sinjab 2019, 199). Over half of the journalists interviewed had received credible threats to their physical safety from governments, non-state actors, or both. Several, particularly journalists reporting from their home country, had been arrested by state agents, especially when reporting for local outlets. The majority mentioned being surveilled; one local journalist had been repeatedly tortured. Roula Khalaf (2019, 263), a seasoned correspondent, emphasizes that “reporters under pressure can be made to feel as though they must adhere to red lines and withhold some of the most sensitive information they uncover.” Speaking about reporting from states such as China, journalist David Schlesinger underscores: “if they don’t like what you’ve written, then they’ll either throw you out or make your life difficult or call you in and yell at you. Or in the cases of what you see now with Bloomberg and The New York Times, they’ll control visa access for replacements for the bureau” (quoted in Armoudian 2016, 120). Countries may also use censorship or launch libel cases against journalists who report on certain topics (Armoudian 2016, 120). Zoran, for example, explained how differences between defamation laws in federal Iraq versus the Kurdistan Region shaped his reporting; Amy discussed her blacklisting by two governments for reporting on human rights issues. These realities mean that genres of events—from elite corruption to seemingly tamer topics such as pregnancies that occur during US military deployments (Armoudian 2016, 126-128)—may be more difficult to report, receive incomplete coverage, or be completely avoided. Such topics might be locally specific; reporters who had worked in local Kurdish media explicitly mentioned the sensitivities and risks involved with reporting on
suicides. These experiences underscore the intense risks local journalists often face, especially when working for local media, and reveal how such vulnerabilities can shape reporting.

**Markets, reporting, and endogenous dynamics**

Just as access and resource issues challenge academic assumptions of journalists’ uniform interest in and regular interactions with events on the ground, the actors who control media outlets have their own agendas that shape reporting (Grossman, Margalit, and Mitts 2022). Incorporating external politics and economics into a political science understanding of media sources challenges assumptions of consistency and constancy that underpin scholars’ DGPs. Political communications research emphasizes that many media outlets are fundamentally corporations whose survival is predicated on responsiveness to consumers (Boydstun 2013; Cook 1998) They operate on budgets, have limited space, reporters are expensive, and readers have (changing) preferences (Norris 1995). Within the industry, there is anxiety over these pressures; a 2022 Reuters Institute report notes widespread industry concern that increasing trends towards subscription-based news services will result in media catering to wealthier, highly-educated audiences by publishing material they want to read (Newman 2022, 6).

The journalists interviewed for this research, as well as the texts analyzed, reported concerns that these dynamics force media workers to oversimplify or misrepresent stories that require nuance. The trends they describe imply that many of the pre-set actors found in datasets (e.g., ethnic groups) may have been labeled so by editors responding to market forces and

---

11 Interview with Hoshang, 2019.
accessible audience frames rather than on-the-ground dynamics. "No one is willing to commission five weeks of work," George commented, going on to emphasize the industry’s heavy focus on straightforward, up-to-the-minute, headline-grabbing news that fits pre-existing narratives. BBC correspondent Allan Little notes that he constantly fought about framing with his editors while covering the former Yugoslavia:

I would always say, ‘the Bosnian government forces, the Bosnian government side,’ whereas they wanted to say ‘Muslim forces.’...To me it was a three-sided war in which two sides represented some sort of ethnic supremacy...and the third side represented...multi-ethnic tolerance. [My editor] called them ‘the Muslims,’” and so on [as if] they’re all the same [as the Serbs and Croats]. (Little, quoted in Armoudian 2016, 131-132)

Julie, a print journalist who worked in the Middle East for over a decade before moving into an editorial role, also underscored how perceptions of inherent newsworthiness subtly shaped reporting:

Have you heard of those calculations that cynical hacks make, that one dead [Westerner] equals five dead [Middle Easterners] equals two hundred dead

---

12 Reporters also note the increasing “difficulty of verification” in terms of actor identity and action (Armoudian 120-121).

13 Interview with George, 2019.
[Africans]…that’s not exactly what it is, but that’s roughly [pause] you instinctively know it, when you’re on that beat. It’s not like the actual reporters think these lives are worth less, it’s about newsworthiness.¹⁴

Media outlets must navigate these incentives and constraints to maintain readership and financial viability. Whether formally or informally, outlets also increasingly link articles’ popularity to journalists’ job security and pay, incentivizing the publication of certain types of stories to the exclusion of others (Bland 2021). Mina, who worked for a wire service, relayed reporting for years from sub-Saharan Africa, but only got high online page views when she incorporated then-US President Donald Trump into her narratives. Her editor subsequently instructed her to work the Trump administration into her submissions as much as possible, shaping the kinds of stories she reported and overstating Trump’s position in the pieces printed, a process Arjomand (2022, 65-67) refers to as “frame control.”¹⁵ A 2018 article in CJR emphasizes that during the Trump administration “[n]ewspapers, magazines, and TV news programs simply [had] less space for freelance international stories than before.” However, this effect is conditional; international stories directly tied to the controversies of the administration (e.g., Russia and North Korea) showed an uptick in reporting (Schwartz 2018). In addition to contributing to bias in events datasets, such insertions would bias scholarship based upon Factiva searches or text scraping for mentions of Donald Trump, as his name was artificially inserted to drive page views, rather than representing genuine coverage.

---

¹⁴ Background interview with Julie, 2016. Quoted with permission.

¹⁵ Interview with Mina, Summer 2018.
This phenomenon extends beyond the Trump example. Danny Gold, who covered the Rohingya crisis in Burma, notes that getting articles published about “lesser known subjects” requires strategic framing. In his case, he leveraged the 2016 US presidential election and Hillary Clinton’s previous work on Burma as Secretary of State as a hook for Rohingya coverage, underscoring “…if I need to frame it that way to get out in the field and cover it, you know” (quoted in Armoudian 2016, 132-133). Ingrid, an experienced freelancer who reported on gender-related issues in the Middle East, had a Europe-based editor inform her that “no one” was interested in an article about child marriage markets unless it involved al-Qa`ida; she added mention of a tenuous link between the group and child marriage to get the story published and be paid for her work.16 Zeina Karam (2019, 233) notes of reporting on the Syrian Civil War that “The Islamic State group’s barbaric activities became the subject of global fascination and dominated the news…Freelance journalists complained that if their story did not have an Islamic State element to it, editors weren’t interested.” An implication for researchers is that endogenous market dynamics—e.g., that “clickable” Islamic State stories beget more Islamic State stories and crowd out other coverage—affect research designs that rely on methods such as content analysis and machine learning because media markets, rather than events on the ground, drive coverage (including the quantity and type of events reported).

Political scholarship with media sources: Towards new research & engagement

The media industry is meant to produce news, not data. Journalists do not operate to generate scientifically representative reporting, which brings into question the data uncritically harvested

16 Personal conversation with Ingrid, 2010, author’s field notes.
from such sources and assumed to be “objective,” or at least predictable. Scholars must directly engage the reality that existing biases are both stochastic and non-random.

This letter identifies gaps between end users’ expectations of what event data represent (consistent and constant reporting that carries systematic, identifiable biases) versus the reality of what those data reflect. That reality encompasses both access biases (e.g., associated with journalist presence, safety, and censorship) and editorial biases (e.g., linked to frame control, audience, and profitability).\(^\text{17}\) Both biases shape what outlets publish—and is thus included in datasets—and what media coverage excludes—producing silences and missing data. On one level, these findings indicate a need for more attention to DGP{s in both manually-coded events data and text scraping of media sources, as well as an acknowledgement of endogenous market dynamics. That is, given that bias in some datasets appears more extensive than previously reported (Clarke 2021, 6), and that there are documented regional, country-level (Dawkins 2021), and temporal variations in reporting bias, the bias and its origins themselves ought to be addressed as objects of inquiry that reveal crucial political dynamics. For scholars interested in identifying different bias patterns that affect the data, collaboration with regional specialists and interpretivist scholars could facilitate the type of data forensics necessary. The goal here would not be for such scholars to offer a “fact check” or “verification” of the data, but rather to intellectually collaborate to explore the meso- and micro-level politics—whether lack of market interest or overwhelming censorship—that shape the biases that affect specific locations and periods.

This article also reveals how the media-based material scholars treat as data has its own politics; unreported realities thus create opportunities to use existing data in new ways. Research

\(^{17}\) The author thanks Reviewer #2 for suggesting the terms “access bias” and “editorial bias.”
using existing datasets might examine how market opportunities shift over time; machine learning techniques might identify the rise and fall of specific media content and frames, especially in connection to major events such as elections and wars. Scholars might directly interrogate the “crowding out” mechanism associated with the Trump administration’s tenure and its long-term political consequences for democratic engagement and foreign policy. Acknowledging the challenges associated with the DGPs of media-sourced data clarifies new opportunities for critical conceptual and causal research that addresses the core of how ideas operate in political life.

The author declares the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by Johns Hopkins University and certificate numbers are provided in the text and appendix.

The author affirms that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

This research was funded by an Exploration of Practical Ethics Grant from the Berman Institute of Bioethics at Johns Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School of Public Health and by the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

Research documentation that supports the findings of this study is openly available in the APSR Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/6RVZ2P.
References


Supplemental Materials

Unreported Realities: The Political Economy of Media-Sourced Data

Research Methodology, Anonymized List of Interviewees, and Researcher Positionality

Sarah E. Parkinson, Aronson Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies
Johns Hopkins University

Project Methodology and Siting

The original in-depth interviews cited in this study took place as part of a larger, longer-term, immersive project on ethical communities of practice in conflict-affected spaces. The researcher began the project by conducting a background interview with a journalist contact from their earlier research, Julie, and participating in an 18-person chat thread with career journalists regarding hostile environment training and the ethics of preparedness for conflict reporting. These conversations shaped the larger team-based, multi-sited project, which involved interviews and participant observation with academics, journalists, and humanitarian aid workers in crisis-affected spaces.

The author conducted fieldwork for this project in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the Ninewa Plains region of federal Iraq during summer 2018 and spring 2019 under protocol HIRB00007471 (later continued under protocol HIRB00010101). As part of the immersive component of the larger project, the researcher conducted observation in leisure and social spaces where journalists congregated, attended political events that attracted media attention, and participated in conferences related to journalism (e.g., the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting’s annual conference). Over the course of the research, several interviewees invited the researcher to dinner parties or happy hours with other journalists, introduced the researcher and the project, and,
following conversations regarding consent, prompted conversations on related topics. The researcher recorded these interactions in their field notes. While not part of the interview data presented in this letter, these conversations also inform the analysis.

Geographically centering a study of the political economy of media and its relationship to scholarly DGPs on conflicts in the Levant and Mashriq is analytically useful for several reasons. At the time of the study, Syria was in the sixth and seventh years of an internationalized civil war and the site of the largest forced migration crisis in the world. The Iraqi, Kurdish, and, later, international coalition conflict with Islamic State (IS) escalated dramatically in June 2014 with the group’s assault on and occupation of Mosul and Tikrit, triggering massive waves of internal displacement. The Battle of Mosul ended in December 2017 with “clean up” operations continuing long afterward; its scope and intensity elicited comparisons in scale with World War I’s Battle of Verdun (Fox 2020, 9). These conflicts attracted massive media attention; by 2017, a total of 226 media crews registered with the Iraqi Joint Operations Command, of which 84 were foreign (Reporters Without Borders 2017). The historical significance of regional events and the extent of journalistic engagement thus constitutes a critical case for understanding the connection between the political economy of journalism and scholars’ DGPs. The sheer amount of coverage, and public discussion of it among journalists, brings practices, processes, and dynamics into relief that may not be as visible in other sites.

While there was massive international and domestic media attention to the conflicts, the concurrent dangers involved and associated restrictions—both physical and political—prompted a

---

18 Under the aegis of Operation Inherent Resolve.

19 These numbers likely omit many freelancers.
moment of reflection for many journalists and news organizations. This unique time of contemplation for the industry and the extensive public discussion associated with it presents an opportunity for scholars to better understand the broad mechanisms that shape media coverage of various political phenomena, to unpack context-specific interactions between journalistic access and media markets, and to better understand the implications for their own DGPs. Interviews, memoirs, and secondary sources from on-the-ground journalists outline how they negotiated challenges, what their limitations were, and, in many cases, reflect upon how markets and access dynamics shaped reporting (Borri 2013; MacDiarmid 2017; Hankir 2019; Culebras 2017).

Emergent forms of local, citizen journalism navigated conflict reporting in new ways. Most prominent in IS-occupied cities such as Mosul and Raqqa, this style of reportage focused on the lived experience of war rather than on detailed, daily coverage of events, which was impossible to achieve under IS domination (Mohammed 2022; Lekas Miller 2018; Crabapple 2014).

This shift illustrates an implication of Dorff et. al’s (2023) argument regarding how violence can reshape journalistic coverage as well as a source of geographically-bounded silences specifically in events coverage, with downstream effects for researchers seeking to extract relevant data from media sources. Indeed, the unique reflexivity many journalists brought to their reflections on coverage of events in Syria and Iraq provides an important window into dynamics that shape the entire industry, but vary between contexts. Lekas Miller (2018) relays of her arrival in the region to cover Operation Inherent Resolve:

“The Western media was already salivating over ISIS stories. Major television networks threw thousands of dollars per day towards fixers, translators, and security consultants, bought embeds in elite units, and traveled to the frontlines in full-on
convoys… But in the frenzy of gaining access to the frontline—and, later, to Mosul and Raqqa—many of us realized later that we missed half the story. What was happening on the other side? …Without being able to access the Islamic State itself, reporters were forced to rely on survivor testimonies and salvaged documents to cross-reference and piece together what happened during the preceding two years.

Related, human rights advocates and researchers have noted both belligerents’ leveraging of and outlets’ fixation on IS’s gender ideology and deployment of gender-based violence (Szekely 2020; Foster and Minwalla 2018), often to the exclusion of equal reporting regarding other actors’ violations of human rights (see, e.g., Wille 2016; 2017). Moreover, international, public debates surrounding journalistic ethics brought the perverse incentives—and resultant flaws in reporting—associated with IS-centric dominant editorial frames and audience foci to the fore (Al-Bawaba 2018; Wemple 2020; Cartwright, Tani, and Olding 2020).

*Interview sample, protocol, and ethics*

The interviews used in this analysis were designed to generate evidence of journalists’ situated understandings of ethics for a larger abductive, interpretive research project. They consequently reflect the experiences of a broad but incomplete spectrum of experiences in the English-speaking journalistic world that centers on the Levant and the Mashriq. Notably, the sample of journalists interviewed represents professionals who largely resided in the spaces from which they were reporting. Many had been born in or lived in the broader region for years and spoke at least one local language fluently. They held North American, European, and Middle Eastern citizenships; one striking dynamic that surfaced in the interviews centered on the dangers
of reporting as someone without North American or Western European citizenship. Interviewees’ career paths included working as independent writers on social media, fixers, media liaisons, freelancers, stringers, correspondents, editors, and producers; they had reported for a variety of outlets spanning international newspapers of record to local blogs.

The sample highlights sometimes blurry distinctions between “international” and “local” media, given how much international reporting still relies on input and decisions made by local media professionals (e.g., a fixer, even for an English-language journalist who speaks a local language like Noora, who spoke fluent Arabic)(see also Arjomand 2022) and on journalists who wore both hats (e.g., someone like Nezar who got started in and continued to work in local social media but was also a correspondent for an international outlet). No “parachute” journalists are represented, nor are journalists who did not speak English. It was beyond the scope and out of line with the methodological approach of the larger project to seek out a representative sample of conflict journalists, though such an endeavor would indisputably be helpful to forwarding scholarly understanding of how the media affects scholarly work.

A variety of different relationships shaped the researcher’s rapport with the participants. In addition to the interviewee with whom the researcher had a long-standing personal relationship (Julie), the researcher also recruited participants through contacts in their broad professional networks (Mina, Amy, George, Noora, Sam); by approaching journalists or being approached at events such as humanitarian coordination meetings, political fora, and political party conferences (Jalal, Moe, Tariq, Saman); via snowball referrals from other interviewees (Tariq, Noora, Amy, Ronin), via cold emailing using publicly-available contact information (Sasha), and through a research assistant who was a local university student interested in the media (Hoshang, Nezar, Zoran, Amy). Several interviewees entered the project via multiple avenues of recruitment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym (year interviewed)</th>
<th>Professional Background</th>
<th>Type of outlet(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Julie (2016)</td>
<td>Freelancer, correspondent, editor</td>
<td>European and North American print media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mina (2018)</td>
<td>Correspondent</td>
<td>Newswire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalal (2018)</td>
<td>Media liaison</td>
<td>Assists journalists reporting on northern Iraq/KRI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saman (2018)</td>
<td>Fixer, freelance media research assistant</td>
<td>US, European, Middle Eastern print media, radio, TV, newswires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe (2018)</td>
<td>Translator, fixer, public relations</td>
<td>Global print and TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoshang (2019)</td>
<td>Independent writer, editor, media trainer</td>
<td>Middle Eastern print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha (2019)</td>
<td>Freelancer</td>
<td>Global English-language print media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tariq (2019)</td>
<td>Public relations, media liaison, reporter, correspondent, producer</td>
<td>North American and European TV and multimedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronin (2019)</td>
<td>Correspondent, social media</td>
<td>European and Middle Eastern print and TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George (2019)</td>
<td>Freelancer</td>
<td>Global print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy (2019)</td>
<td>Independent writer and researcher, freelancer, media trainer</td>
<td>North American and Middle Eastern print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam (2019)</td>
<td>Fixer, social media, freelance research assistant</td>
<td>Global print and TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nezar (2019)</td>
<td>Correspondent, social media</td>
<td>US and Middle Eastern radio, print, multimedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoran (2019)</td>
<td>Correspondent, producer, media trainer, consultant</td>
<td>Middle Eastern TV and print</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The researcher employed a research assistant (RA) based on a trusted academic contact’s recommendation in order to develop a list of potential interviewees in the English-language media world in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan and to help with recruitment; this strategy was in part to identify interviewees who were involved in media training and consulting—and thus the diffusion and maintenance of ethical communities of practice—and who worked as fixers. Neither group would have consistently published bylines; they were thus relatively less visible to the researcher. The RA also drove the researcher to three of the interviews and, at interviewees’ express invitation, remained for two of them. The researcher paid the RA at the local university’s going rate for undergraduate research assistants.

The interview protocol asked about journalists’ training and skill development, career paths, experiences reporting, reflections on the field of journalism, thoughts on ethical challenges present in the work, strategies for dealing with ethical challenges, and stories they were most proud of reporting. The researcher conducted all of their own interviews. Only one journalist who the researcher contacted (via a snowball referral) and who agreed to an interview did not eventually participate; they fell out of contact while on assignment. Additionally, a journalist from a major European print publication whom the researcher met at a political event relayed that he was unable to participate in the project because of the outlet’s restrictive policies regarding external interviews. While the journalists were recruited due to their employment at English-language international outlets, many simultaneously worked for or had previously worked for local outlets and drew upon that positionality to make comparisons between local and international media in interviews.
The researcher met journalists for interviews in locations of their choosing (e.g., private offices, cafes) after sending a description of the interview and consent procedures via email or an encrypted messaging service. They explained the steps they would take to protect interviewees’ confidentiality and did not record conversations. Given their profession and the context, journalists were uniquely familiar with consent procedures, data security, and discussing different levels of attribution as well as being well-situated to assess any risks involved with participation in the project.

The journalists interviewed universally saw the structural economic and political conditions under which they were operating as presenting serious ethical issues that required constant negotiation, especially given how their understandings of how said conditions shaped the stories they could tell and the depth with which they could convey them. These themes also dovetailed with other conversations that the researcher had with journalists with whom they did not conduct interviews, in addition to the primary and secondary literature consulted for this article.

*Researcher Positionality*

The researcher’s prior experience provided them situated insights into the media industry, which informed how they scoped the larger project, developed interview questions, interacted with interviewees, and leveraged primary and secondary sources. The researcher has now been working in the Middle East and North Africa for more than fifteen years. They have spent extended periods of time on the ground around journalists, including during the 2007 war in Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in Lebanon, in the context of the Syrian Uprising and Civil War (2011-present; the researcher was in Lebanon in 2011, 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2019), and during the Mosul Operation (2016-
2017; the researcher was in the KRI and the Ninewa Plains in 2016, 2018, and 2019). Events in the region, several journalists’, fixers’, and translators’ deaths and kidnappings, and regimes’ efforts to manipulate media actors generated conversations about various aspects of the profession in the researcher’s circles. Their time in various sites also coincided with major contentious events, which the researcher often observed firsthand as well as following them in the media and discussing with both participants and (informally) with journalists.

Conversations regarding newsworthiness, the political economy of journalism, and the risks involved with reporting on specific topics have repeatedly emerged during the researcher’s career. During their previous, immersive project, the researcher cooperated with foreign journalists to run a training for local journalists in their field site through a community NGO; the workshop centered on how to pitch local stories such that they were picked up in the international media. Interlocutors from the scholar’s previous project had worked as drivers, fixers, and translators for foreign media; the researchers’ conversations with them about their experiences are recorded in the researcher’s field notes from projects that span 2007-2018 and are referenced in scholarly publications. During graduate school, the scholar worked on a freelance basis as a paid archival researcher for a major international newspaper’s Middle East bureau chief; prior to their career as an academic, the researcher worked in the marketing department of a prominent international publication.

**Bibliography**


MacDiarmid, Campbell. 2017. “As Bombs Rain, Freelancers Build Their Own Bunker.”


https://mosuleye.wordpress.com/.


