

Journalism's invisible brokers: fixers in Turkey and Syria (Noah Amir Arjomand)

Abstract

The “fixer” is an enigmatic figure in journalism. Not fitting neatly into the category of “interpreter,” “producer,” “reporter,” “activist,” or “source” but sometimes sharing the roles of all those participants in the newsmaking process, fixers are media workers defined by their local-ness. Fixers broker relationships between international journalists and ground realities. They translate, selectively inform, code-switch, and match-make to help foreign clients make sense of happenings and help local sources feel heard.

The ambiguous informality of the “fixer” label corresponds to fixers’ invisibility, precarity, and forgettability within the field of journalism. Critics charge that labeling media workers from the Global South “fixers” as distinct from their “journalist” Global-North colleagues amounts to a discursive weapon to maintain a colonial hierarchy within the discipline.

Ethnographic research in Turkey from 2014-2016 led me to a more complex understanding of fixers’ place in the professional hierarchy and news gatekeeping process. I found that the informality of fixers’ status is both an asset and a liability. In political atmospheres hostile to independent journalism like 2010s Turkey and Syria, where media workers have faced violence and prosecution, fixers are often able to fly under the radar of the powerful to avoid censorship and reprisal. Fixers are also strategic in their self-presentation—sometimes as representatives of the International Community, other times as “just the interpreter”—in ways that allow them to transgress norms and gain entrée into corners of society that might be otherwise inaccessible to them.

On the other hand, the tenuous informality of fixers’ relationships with news organizations mean that they enjoy fewer protections when things do go wrong. Clients also delegate much of journalism’s “dirty work” to fixers: ethically dubious actions like paying or coercing sources, serving propagandistic agendas in exchange for access, and even fabricating information. Foreign colleagues can keep their hands clean because local fixers get theirs dirty, a pattern that reinforces the shady reputation of fixers and justifies their continued subordination in the professional hierarchy, along with news organizations’ distrust in their ability to transcend their local-ness and report “objectively.”

I nonetheless found—among the Turkish, Syrian, Kurdish, and Afghan fixers who plied their trade in Istanbul and along the Turkey-Syria border—upwardly mobile knowledge producers who were influential in shaping the way the world made sense of events that seized global headlines: the Syrian Civil War, rise of ISIS, PKK insurgency, refugee crisis, Turkish coup d’état attempt, and more. Viewing these events from the vantage point of fixers as they attempted to broker fragile cooperation and intersubjectivity between reporters and sources with radically different perspectives and interests can teach us much about the invisible and forgotten labor that underlies news production everywhere.

Bio

Noah Amir Arjomand studied sociology (PhD) at Columbia University. He is currently enrolled in the MFA Writing for the Performing Arts program at the University of California's Riverside campus. Cambridge University Press published his first book, *Fixing Stories: Local Newsmaking and International Media in Turkey and Syria*, in 2022. *Fixing Stories* is an ethnography of the roles and strategies of “fixers” who broker communication between foreign journalists and sources. He shows how fixers shape the news and manage their powerful but precarious position between cultural and political worlds.