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Lindsay Palmer

The fixers: Local news workers and the underground labor of international reporting

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 232 pp. ISBN 9780190680824

Reviewed by Kate Wright, The University of Edinburgh.

Palmer's important, timely and eminently readable book demonstrates that the labour of fixers is frequently invisible and misunderstood within journalism. Far from carrying out unskilled or logistical work, fixers are engaged in crucial and complex forms of editorial practice. But how should we theorise these practices? Using rare interview data from an admirably diverse range of countries (including key 'hubs' of fixers in Beirut, Moscow and Mexico), Palmer argues that we should see fixers as a unique kind of cultural intermediary. She then develops this idea to address five specific kinds of cultural mediation which fixers perform, which are addressed in dedicated chapters.

In Chapter 1, Palmer focuses on how fixers must simultaneously conceptualise and relinquish 'the story'. In Chapter 2, she explains how navigating logics involves negotiating both material and cultural differences. In Chapter 3, she interrogates the complex interpersonal work involved in sustaining relationships with a wide variety of sources. In Chapter 4, she analyses the ways in which interpreting languages involve fixers engaging in creative selection and composition, as well as regionally specific knowledge. But above all, Palmer sees fixers as being tasked with ensuring the safety of the journalists they work with, even at the cost of their own safety or other bodily needs. So, this forms Chapter 5, the final findings chapter.

Palmer pulls these chapters together skilfully by developing cross-cutting themes of risk/trust, insiders/outside, the cultural/material and connections/disconnections. Yet, she never falls into the trap of setting up simplistic binary oppositions. In particular, she eschews well-worn categories like 'local-national' by pointing out that many fixers are frequently not from the countries where they work, so operate within a much more 'messy' context, involving the 'collision of global processes and cultural differences' (p. 9). Palmer's attention to other forms of intersectionality are, likewise, welcome, including reflective sections highlighting how gender and ethnicity shape, but never wholly determine, fixers' role perceptions.

Thus, Palmer's book contributes not only unusual and rich empirical data but also innovative new theoretical understandings, to the burgeoning literature on the nature and effects of fixers' work including earlier, groundbreaking work by Hamilton and Jenner (2004), Murrell (2013, 2015) and Palmer and Fontan (2007). This book also has much to say to research into the practices and political economies of freelancing (discussed by Massey and Elmore (2018)), including interdisciplinary work on translation and interpretation (Bielsa and Bassnett, 2008; Wright, 2018). In addition, it complements research into violence against journalists (discussed by Brambila and Hughes (2019)) and makes a valuable contribution to the broader, ongoing project of de-Westernising journalism studies (Park and Curran, 2000).

There were some issues which I would have liked Palmer to delve into in more depth, although her ability to do so may have been constrained by the need to protect participants. Specifically, I wanted to know more about the kinds of ethico-political deliberations fixers engage in regarding their decisions to work for multiple news organisations, including CGTN

and RT. The text begins to explore this, but then moved on quite quickly. This was a shame as a more sustained discussion would have made a really useful contribution to political communications, which tends to compartmentalise state-funded news organisations.

I would have also loved Palmer to dig more deeply into issues of precarity by examining whether fixers felt that journalists' increased precarity was changing (or perhaps entrenching) the status quo in fixer–journalist relations. After all, given many correspondents are freelancers these days, it would be interesting to hear whether this new breed of reporters are even more eager to efface the contributions of fixers in order to advance their own interests. Or perhaps, whether such precariously employed reporters mitigate the risk involved in sustaining their own livelihoods by building more cooperative networks with fixers and others?

Nevertheless, I would hesitate to frame these queries as criticisms. They are simply areas that I wanted to hear and think more about, and that is the mark of an excellent, deeply thoughtful and constructive contribution to media scholarship.

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