

Essay

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Fixers in a war zone

Foreign media's invisible producers

Abstract: Fixers are rarely mentioned as members of journalistic teams, yet their contribution to foreign and specifically war reporting is enormous. The current war in Ukraine is no exception. Fixers act as guides for foreign correspondents, helping them to navigate a foreign country, language, and culture. At the same time, they often receive the least protection – as demonstrated recently by the death of the Ukrainian journalist and fixer Bohdan Bitik, who was working together with a correspondent from the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* in Kherson. This case, and others like it, give rise to plenty of questions: Under what conditions do fixers work and what are the rules for their work? What does their role include and (how) are their rights protected? This paper seeks answers and presents some views from journalists and media experts.

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1. Working at their own risk

The start of the Russian attack in February 2022 triggered an enormous rise in the attention paid by foreign media to reporting from Ukraine. Journalists from all over the world not only reported on the events of the war, but also began to discover Ukraine as a nation and cultural region. In large part due to a lack of language skills and insufficient access to the country's institutions and people,

many editorial offices are forced to rely on news fixers when working in Ukraine. News fixers are people, usually locals, who are familiar with the locations and language and who work together with foreign correspondents (cf. PALMER 2019). They are sometimes also known as »stringers.« Many media rely heavily on the work of journalistic fixers in their international reporting, especially in regions in which they do not have their own correspondents' offices.

Fixers often take on tasks that would originally have been done by journalists. They not only help with interpreting, but also plan the reporting, organize meetings and contacts, research facts and background on events, conduct interviews, and analyze documents. Without their fixers, foreign correspondents would often be literally lost. Ukraine is no exception. Demand there has risen sharply since the Russian invasion, with Western media not only drawing on fixers they have used in the past, but also employing many more people over the last few months.

Ukrainian actor Rita Burkovska is one of them. She has worked as a fixer since last year and says that she has already worked with various foreign journalists. »I had the feeling that Ukraine has become very important to them. They want to find out more about the background to the conflict. They want to understand who we are.« She herself was also highly motivated to tell the world about the war in Ukraine: »I want to stay in Ukraine, at the heart of the action, and do something useful here.«

The actor played an aerial reconnaissance specialist who returns from Russian imprisonment in the Donbas in the wartime drama *Butterfly Vision* by Ukrainian director Maksym Nakonechnyi. »The film is about sexual violence, torture, and imprisonment,« she says. »We spent time looking at these topics when researching the film; we met with victims and their families. This has been going on in this war for nine years. When an acquaintance asked me whether I could help journalists as a fixer after the Russian attack, I said yes straight away.« Rita Burkovska then travelled to the liberated town of Bucha with BBC reporter Joel Gunter, accompanying investigators and relatives who were documenting the Russian war crimes and mass graves. »I can't say that I or the others were not afraid. But who else will do it?«

Almost everyone in Ukraine who has at least basic knowledge of a foreign language in order to communicate with foreign correspondents has been asked to be a fixer, says Oksana Romaniuk, Director of the Ukrainian Institute of Mass Information (IMI), which is independent of the government and works to strengthen the media and civil society in Ukraine. As time goes by, however, interest in news on the war has waned, and many fixers have now become aware of the risks of their work. After all, they usually work at their own risk. If they get into a difficult situation, they cannot necessarily rely on support from the media companies – as fixers in other crisis and war zones have found to their cost (cf. PALMER 2019: 142-168). All this has meant that the number of short-term fixers in Ukraine

has fallen once again, the IMI observes. International editorial offices now generally choose support from professional local journalists or producers. But even they sometimes have only the precarious status of a fixer. Oksana Romaniuk: »Their lives and their health are constantly under threat. In the past, fixers have been kidnapped and tortured, and foreign media have just left them behind.«

One of the biggest problems is that the work of fixers is not subject to general, binding rules. Jobs are often very individual. The work of foreign media does not fall under Ukrainian jurisdiction. Collaboration between a fixer and the foreign media is organized based on individual agreements – which do not usually include compensation in the case of injury or death.

Without written contracts and agreements, it is very difficult to support fixers who get into difficulties. Often the only way to help is to attract public attention, reports Oksana Romaniuk. One example is the case of the Ukrainian journalist and fixer Bohdan Bitik, who was killed near Kherson in April 2023 while working for the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. Initially, his death was not even mentioned – only the fate of the Italian correspondent who was wounded. It was only when the Ukrainian media community applied pressure and created a scandal around the case that the Italian company recognized the fate of the Ukrainian journalist and paid compensation to his family.

Payments in the case of injury or death of a journalist are actually required by law in Ukraine (unlike in many other states, crisis regions and war zones) – as long as the status as a media representative is proven. It is therefore recommended that fixers formalize and legalize their working relationships with the foreign media in question. Accreditation from the military is also important, providing another instrument to protect fixers. Once accredited, a fixer can expect support from the Ukrainian state, says Romaniuk. The documents needed for this process include confirmation from the relevant editorial office or media company that the fixer is part of the journalistic team. But the situation is more complicated when it comes to insurance: »Foreign journalists are insured, but Ukrainian fixers unfortunately have to take care of their own safety. I know very few who have insurance via the foreign media company. Most of them work at their own risk.«

Actor and fixer Rita Burkovska corroborates this. In her experience, insurance and contracts are the exception (the BBC and a documentary filmmaker from a Spanish broadcaster, for example, offered them to her). Often they are not even mentioned. It is a problem that not only affects fixers, she says. Foreign editorial offices often do not take responsibility for freelance journalists either – and the teams' drivers have even less security. Some drivers are not even provided with safety equipment, procuring it either themselves or through the fixers. However, the situation is not hopeless. In May 2022, six public organizations founded the International Insurance Fund for Journalists (<https://war-correspondent.info/en>). The foundation provides insurance for fixers, journalists, filmmakers, editors

and photographers of independent Ukrainian media and has already insured 100 media professionals working in dangerous areas (as of 31 October 2023).

2. Risks for fixers – and for journalism

The risk of physical injury is the biggest risk facing fixers in their work, but it is not the only one. Abit Hoxha from Adger University in Norway researches how conflict reporting in international media is created and defines four categories of risk: physical, financial, psychological, and digital.

Although fixers generally have comparably high earnings compared with the population in the country in question, it is not a secure, permanent income with which they can plan for their lives and their families. They have little social security and have to accept risks whose consequences, such as trauma, may continue even long after the job is over. »We must not forget that these people often watch their fellow citizens die. That can have a long-lasting impact on them, as they do not receive appropriate psychological preparation (training),« says Abit Hoxha. Rita Burkovska confirms this. The most difficult aspect for her, she says, is when people she knew well die in the war. When she thinks about difficult topics like that, she often does not feel the effects until after the job is done. »I actually cannot imagine how one can live in a world in which the kind of incredible brutality that Russia is inflicting on Ukraine is possible,« says Bukovska. »How can one not lose one's inner light, one's trust in people and in the future?« She finds that meditation helps, and receives support from the large community of fixers who have had similar experiences. Her profession as an actor and the fact that she had engaged with war as a topic before help her to maintain a certain distance, Bukovska believes. »However difficult it might be, it is not happening to me, but to other people, who are suffering much more than I am. But that makes it all the more important to report on what happens to them.« She also attends special training courses, such as on dealing with victims of violence and their relatives, on ethically responsible reporting, and on methods for preventing emotional exhaustion. This kind of professional preparation and follow-up can clearly help fixers to avoid, or at least alleviate, some risks. A lack of experience, however, can be very dangerous – both for the fixers themselves and for others.

When it comes to online safety, says Hoxha, fixers are less aware than experienced journalists – especially fixers who have no journalistic experience at all. Some do not even know how to protect their own privacy. In a war, being able to deal with the dangers of online misinformation and personal discreditation online is crucial. Unlike foreign correspondents, local fixers are integrated into the social life of the local area, have friends and family in the region, are

members of clubs and societies, and may have another profession. All that makes them vulnerable in multiple ways.

Fixers not only put themselves in danger – they can also put other people in a difficult or perilous position. Insufficient training and journalistic experience can be a problem here, too, not least when it comes to applying and adhering to professional and ethical standards in reporting. When a Russian rocket killed a four-year-old child in the Ukrainian town of Winnyzja last year, doctors decided not to tell the child's severely injured mother of the death immediately, so as not to make her condition worse. But a team from an Italian broadcaster went into the hospital with their Ukrainian fixer, told the mother of the death of her child, and filmed her reaction. The incident caused a scandal. »The fixer was not a professional journalist and had no idea about ethical professional standards. Fixers without prior experience might not know about the unique features of working as a journalist in a warzone,« says Oksana Romaniuk.

Under wartime conditions, Ukraine has put legal and executive limits on the work of journalists (for example decree N 73, which governs relations between the media and the Ukrainian army). But fixers and film crews have still sometimes ended up in forbidden zones: »The fixer wanted to impress some foreign journalists, but the violations led to them losing their accreditation,« reports Romaniuk. In her opinion, inexperience can be exploited for purposes that have little to do with good journalism. »There have been cases where fixers begin to work with people who later turned out to be Russian propagandists. When a professional journalist works as a fixer, he analyzes who his client is and can quickly find out whether they are really journalists.«

3. Collaboration only on a »technical« level?

How can the security problem be resolved? Our interviewees do not have a clear answer. They even have different interpretations of the term »fixer« and what the role entails – the features and limits of the job are not clearly defined. What they do agree on is that attitudes to the role and the working conditions of fixers need to change.

Abit Hoxha does not see the term »fixer« as negative. He believes that those who work as fixers deserve to be seen differently, and to receive more recognition and respect. After all, he says, they have experience and abilities that established journalists lack and urgently need. He recommends a broader definition of the role of fixer. Ultimately, they are not just people who support journalists in war reporting – they might also be specialists who analyze large quantities of data, for example, without which vital journalistic research would not be possible.

That is why, Hoxha continues, it is so important to achieve greater recognition for the role of fixers in journalism – an auxiliary role that is no less important.

Oksana Romaniuk does not agree. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the fixers have no time to lose, the media expert argues. It will take years for attitudes and views on the role to change. In her view, the concept of the fixer needs to be abolished altogether. »The Western media community sees fixers as technical workers who are not part of the media team. There is therefore no need to mention them publicly or to pay them compensation. They are »just« people who call a few numbers, no more. To change this attitude, we need to change the concept, we need to refer to these people not as fixers, but as producers. The producer is a member of the journalist team who has the same rights and deserves the same respect.«

As an expression of this respect, fixer-producers expect their names to be mentioned in the finished material and publications (cf. PALMER 2019: 185-190). A lot here depends on the medium in question or the journalists responsible. »Sometimes, an experienced journalist who has worked in Afghanistan comes along and behaves as if he knows everything because he has been to war. But the war here is totally different,« says Rita Burkovska. Sometimes, she continues, the refusal to name fixers is explained with the argument that it is too dangerous – although this is not necessarily true. But Burkovska has also had positive experiences. There are many journalists for whom treating their Ukrainian colleagues properly is important, she says. Her favorite form of work is when she has the opportunity both to learn from experienced foreign journalists and to contribute her own ideas, research unusual characters, develop a topic, or take on editorial tasks, such as interviewing soldiers in a psychiatric clinic (for an article in the *New York Times* about post-traumatic stress disorders). Luckily, there are journalists who appreciate this exchange of ideas and are looking for professional collaboration.

Efforts to be recognized as »producers« are commonplace among Ukrainians working in the media. Many fixers today take on roles that go beyond their conventional duties. Oksana Romaniuk lists some of them: »They organize travel, they are responsible for context. They apply for permits, they help with communication, they look for protagonists. They are responsible for a large part of the journalistic work.« For this very reason, she believes, foreign colleagues who come to Ukraine are increasingly looking not for inexperienced fixers, but for seasoned journalists and producers.

ZDF correspondent Dara Hassanzadeh is one of those who works with a professional Ukrainian team. He rejects the term »fixer.« »Who is a fixer? Anyone who works in journalism is a journalist, even if they have not studied at a university or written for the *New York Times*,« says the correspondent. For him, the most important thing is that the cameraman, the cutter and the journalist that accompany the team and take on the role of fixer are able to understand the language

and the social conventions. This not only makes it possible to achieve better images and an atmospheric cut, he says, but also helps to foster trust in difficult situations, which are not uncommon in times of war.

When journalist-fixers not only organize the work of foreign journalists, but also take on work that is essentially editorial in nature, they become co-authors. Sometimes they even get the recognition they deserve. The *New York Times*, for example, which won a Pulitzer Prize for its reporting on the war in Ukraine, listed all the journalists and fixers involved as members of the team. One of the fixers, Ukrainian journalist Stas Kozlyuk, drew attention to this with these words: »In this story, Ukrainian journalists are often true colleagues of foreign journalists. And it is cool that some of our foreign colleagues see us that way.« The editorial office listed everyone who had contributed to an article, he continues, even when the list ran to around 20 people, like in the article »Putin's War.«

At the other end of the spectrum, says Oksana Romaniuk, is the work of »parachute journalists,« who just fly into the warzone knowing little about the context of the country, or are simply looking for sensations and pay little attention to the professionalism of their fixers. But there are now far fewer foreign journalists in Ukraine than there were at the start of the invasion. The war has become a sad part of everyday life, and fatigue has set in in large parts of the international media. As a result, fixers see their work as more important than ever, despite the risks. Rita Burkovska: »We make a huge contribution to reporting in the foreign media. Thanks to our help, the war has not disappeared from the public agenda.« In future, Rita Burkovska would like to return to professional acting. But while the war continues, she wants to carry on her work as a journalistic producer. Meanwhile, Rita Burkovska has been named Best European Actress at the Septimius Awards for her role in the film »Butterfly Vision«.

About the author

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