**Supplemental Materials**

**Unreported Realities: The Political Economy of Media-Sourced Data**

**Research Methodology, Anonymized List of Interviewees, and Researcher Positionality**

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*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[[1]](#footnote-1) 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).[[2]](#footnote-2) 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 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 1: Anonymized List of Interviewees**

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| **Pseudonym (year interviewed)** | **Professional Background** | **Type of outlet(s)** |
| Julie (2016) | Freelancer, correspondent, editor | European and North American print media |
| Mina (2018) | Correspondent | Newswire |
| Jalal (2018) | Media liaison | Assists journalists reporting on northern Iraq/KRI |
| Saman (2018) | Fixer, freelance media research assistant | US, European, Middle Eastern print media, radio, TV, newswires |
| Moe (2018) | Translator, fixer, public relations | Global print and TV |
| Hoshang (2019) | Independent writer, editor, media trainer | Middle Eastern print |
| Sasha (2019) | Freelancer | Global English-language print media |
| Tariq (2019) | Public relations, media liaison, reporter, correspondent, producer | North American and European TV and multimedia |
| Ronin (2019) | Correspondent, social media | European and Middle Eastern print and TV |
| George (2019) | Freelancer | Global print |
| Noora (2019) | Correspondent | European and North American print, multimedia, newswire |
| Amy (2019) | Independent writer and researcher, freelancer, media trainer | North American and Middle Eastern print |
| Sam (2019) | Fixer, social media, freelance research assistant | Global print and TV |
| Nezar (2019) | Correspondent, social media | US and Middle Eastern radio, print, multimedia |
| Zoran (2019) | Correspondent, producer, media trainer, consultant | Middle Eastern TV and print |

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.

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1. Under the aegis of Operation Inherent Resolve. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These numbers likely omit many freelancers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)