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THE EMOTIONAL GAP? FOREIGN REPORTERS, LOCAL FIXERS AND THE OUTSOURCING OF EMPATHY[1]

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News companies increasingly outsource newswork to freelancers and local collaborators – 'fixers' and producers. The trend has gained new topicality with the advent of the current Russo–Ukrainian war, where the work of media professionals on the ground – local and foreign journalists, producers, fixers, photographers, fact-checkers – and their digital media activities in the online space are crucial factors shaping the dynamics of the war (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015).

While there is a growing body of research on the collaboration between local and foreign media professionals and the underlying inequalities in safety, editorial authority, and remuneration (e.g. Baloch and Andresen 2019; Seo 2016), there are several blind spots. Namely, the research too readily accepts as a starting point the division between West and non-West, which assumes that local media workers are fundamentally different from and unequal to Western correspondents, thus inadequately stressing the locals' otherness. These studies sparsely touch upon the liminality, in-between-ness, hybridity and complexity of local media professionals' identities (see Kotišová and Deuze 2022). Furthermore, despite the emotional turn in journalism and media studies (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019) that has made

emotionality an important perspective in journalism research, including studies on conflict reporting (e.g. Stupart 2021), cultural journalism (e.g. Kristensen 2021) and local journalism (e.g. Waschková Císařová 2021), the research on fixers has not considered the role of emotions in transnational journalistic collaboration. Moreover, the research has focused on reporting from the Middle East or Pakistan (Khan 2019; Murrell 2010; Palmer 2018). The case of the Russo–Ukrainian war, waged since 2014 and escalated by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has not been addressed from this perspective. The English-language research on Ukrainian media professionals sometimes does mention collaboration with foreign media but focuses rather on the tension between professionalism and activism among post-Maidan Ukrainian journalists (Budivska and Orlova 2017) or journalists' internal displacement (Voronova 2020).

This chapter, based on twenty-two interviews with journalistic actors covering the Russo–Ukrainian war, Ukrainian producers, fixers, journalists, foreign reporters and photographers (both temporarily and permanently based in Ukraine), seeks to shed light on two of these blind spots: the emotions involved in transnational collaboration, and the complexity of the identities of individual actors in the news media. I address the following question: How does the diversity of local and foreign media practitioners' emotional experiences of the war – their emotional distance/proximity – manifest itself in newsmaking processes?

While reporting amidst war is with no doubt shaped by 'hard' circumstances such as security and financial conditions, I argue that many producers, fixers and journalists perceive an 'emotional gap' between the foreigners' detachment and the locals' affective proximity. On the one hand, the locals' emotional closeness to the context they cover can supposedly increase their susceptibility to trauma and post-traumatic stress. On the other hand, foreign reporters' (on short visits) relative distance can result in unethical reporting and behaviour towards sources. Thus, the locals' emotions and empathy are also seen as a 'shield' for the local sources, and hence beneficial to the ethics of the reporting. Moreover, the different levels of closeness are valued because they can lead to complex, higher-quality journalism where local fixers provide their contextual expertise, embodied and in-depth knowledge of the war and its history, while foreign reporters provide perspective and transnational experience. However, I also show that in line with the current postcolonial understanding of transnational journalism (Shome and Hegde 2002) stressing the complexity of local fixers' and journalists' identities (Kotišová and Deuze 2022; Plaut and Klein 2019), the size of this gap depends on the context and can shrink or stretch based on varying proximities to the war (Ahva and Pantti 2014).

Three concepts are central to the argument of this chapter: affective proximity, emotional labour, and empathy. First, affective proximity describes the imagined space between journalists and events which they represent/cover and in which they participate at the same time (Al-Ghazzi 2023; Ahva and Pantti 2014), as is the case for Ukrainian local producers and fixers. The high level of affective proximity of these media professionals covering traumatic events in their community challenges the boundaries between the professional and the personal (Backholm and Idås 2015; Rosen 2011; Kotišová 2017) and adds another layer to the emotional toll of first-hand witnessing of violence. As I will show below, affective proximity does not necessarily follow from geographical proximity (Ahva and Pantti 2014), which makes the uneven distribution of emotions among local and foreign newsworkers more complicated. Second, I use the concept of emotional labour, that is, 'the management of emotion required of employees based on the demands of their job' (Hopper and Huxford 2015: 25), to describe how Ukrainian local producers and fixers 'compartmentalize' different components of emotions and use their emotional experiences as embodied knowledge that benefits journalistic accuracy and ethics. Third, some of my interviewees link the latter, journalistic ethics, to empathy, that is, the ability to recognise others' feeling states and thoughts and to participate in or respond to these states. Antje Glück (2016) describes empathy and emotional capital as indispensable parts of journalistic work, which is corroborated by the importance given to empathy by my interviewees.

Fixers and emotions in conflict reporting: Two recent discoveries

News fixers – local collaborators of foreign reporters covering conflict areas and transnational affairs more generally – are a historical phenomenon deeply entangled with (Western) foreign correspondence (Murrell 2019; Palmer 2018). These local fixers or producers perform a varied mix of logistical and editorial tasks (e.g. Murrell 2019): they drive, arrange permits and press credentials, share their network with the reporters, book hotels, translate during interviews, arrange interviews, suggest stories, angles, sources, and sometimes do parts of the reporting. Nevertheless, they started being systematically discussed in journalism studies only after September 11 in the ensuing 'war on terror' (Palmer 2018; Palmer and Fontan 2007). Research shows that in a world where a part of conflict journalism 'shifts from *creating* to *verifying* content for news

organizations' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015: 1327), local and locally based media professionals, typically freelancers, are increasingly important actors in transnational newsgathering (Hamilton and Jenner 2004; Khan 2019; Murrell 2010; 2013; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Pendry 2015; Plaut and Klein 2019; Seo 2016). The trend, facilitated by digital means of content production and distribution, is believed to be driven by decreasing news budgets and, importantly, the degradation of the security situation for journalists in some places. The outsourcing of newswork thus goes hand in hand with the outsourcing of risks (Creech 2018), which forms one of the crucial inequalities in foreign newsgathering.

Among other topics, the research on fixers has focused on 'cultural translation' and 'mediation' of the social, political, and ethnic differences between the locals' and foreigners' cultures of origin (Palmer 2018; Murrell 2013). Linguistic translation (see Amich 2013; Murrell 2015; 2019; Palmer 2018) is only a small part of this cultural translation. Fixers also mediate between reporters and the local way of life (Hoxha and Andresen 2019), thus acting 'as an interface between the correspondent, the sources, and the site' (Palmer 2018: 321). Cultural translation includes providing the reporter with updates and context about political developments and educating them on the local way of organising social life (Bishara 2006, Amich 2013). Bridging the cultural divide also entails making people relaxed and at ease in the unknown context, that is, reducing their anxiety and fear.

Thus, much of the local media workers' mediation involves emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). Their affective proximity to the war (Al-Ghazzi 2023), involvement in local communities and personal interests shape the reporting and, within the conflict reporting industry, raise questions about their professionalism and the validity of the professional value of objectivity, often defined as detachment and impartiality (Tuchman 1972; Ward 2010). The neglect of emotion is understandable, given the still relatively scarce research on local producers and fixers. On the other hand, it is surprising, given, first, the many and severe potential risks for local conflict newsworkers' emotional well-being and mental health (see Al-Ghazzi 2023; IMI 2019), and second, journalism scholars' growing interest in emotion that has been sparked in recent years and has been dubbed the 'emotional', 'subjective' or 'affective' turn in media and journalism studies (Richards and Rees 2011; Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen 2021). This turn has brought emotions into the spotlight and contributed to the increasing de-tabooisation of emotions and

their acknowledgement as an inherent and legitimate part of journalistic practice. Given how important emotional labour is to the collaboration within the transnational teams involved in war reporting, we need to use the emotional lens to look at local producers'/fixers' practices, too.

A part of the body of recent research on emotions in conflict journalism has moved away from understanding journalists' emotions as a professional taboo carrying the danger of bias and misrepresentation, spoiling 'objectivity' or potentially resulting in psychopathologies such as post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g. Feinstein et al. 2002; Kotišová 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). Instead, contemporary research approaches journalists' emotional capital and emotional experiences as inherent and beneficial to journalism practice. To name just a few examples, Glück's (2016) interviewees – news journalists from two different contexts – see no conflict between the ideal of a detached journalist and feelings of empathy but consider the latter a central quality for good journalistic storytelling and career development. In the same vein, Richard Stupart (2022) argues that journalists' emotions can be understood in terms of aptness and prudence: as potentially justified and useful. Elsewhere, Stupart (2021) illustrates that emotion is vital to practical ethical reasoning. He challenges the classical binary vision of emotionality vs rationality that has manifested itself in journalism studies as the persistent yet practically untenable discursive contrast between objectivity and subjectivity (Van Zoonen 1998).

Methodological note

This chapter is based on semi-structured to in-depth interviews with twelve Ukrainian and ten foreign (mostly European) reporters, journalists, stringers, fixers, producers and photographers covering the Russian–Ukrainian conflict and Ukraine more generally. Six of the local and none of the foreign media professionals identified as female, while the remaining sixteen interviewees identified as male.

The interviews, revolving around the questions of risks and emotional labour in conflict reporting, were conducted between May and November 2021, on location (offline) in Kyiv and Lviv and online from Amsterdam or Brussels. They lasted between 40 minutes and 4 hours. After an informed consent procedure, they were recorded, transcribed, pseudonymised, and

thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006) using Atlas.ti. The codes that this chapter builds on include 'emotional gap', 'detachment', 'trauma', 'emotional engagement', and 'emotional labour'. The analysis draws partly on a paper in which I focus on 'neutrality, objectivity', 'self-reflexivity', 'bias', and the like (Kotišová 2023).

The timing of the interviews means that they do not capture the latest developments of the war, but they do address the Maidan revolution and the first phase of the conflict starting in 2014/2015 with the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea (based on a 'referendum' that was not internationally recognised) and the armed conflict in the Donbas between the Ukrainian Armed Forces and a complex tangle of groups and people including Russian military officers, 'volunteers', mercenaries, and local separatists (e.g. Plokhy 2015). This war is distinguished by its 'arrested' character (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015). The dynamics of the war are co-shaped by media content and media professionals on the ground, connectivity, and the warring parties working with its digitally mediated ubiquity. Traditional warfare is accompanied by a great amount of dis- and misinformation. One consequence of this intimate link between media logic and the logic of the warfare is that media professionals, being deliberately intimidated and attacked by Russia (RSF 2022), face severe psychological and physical risks when covering areas around the frontline (see CPJ 2022; IMI 2019).

While the pre- and post-February 2022 situations are different (Kotišová 2023), my ongoing informal contact with connections in Ukraine suggests that the Russian invasion created a context where some of the findings presented here have only become more relevant. The scope and brutality of the war have increased, yet Ukraine is still relatively easy to reach. On the one hand, this attracts a substantial number of inexperienced reporters with poor knowledge of the context who are driven by sensationalism (Sardarian 2022). The (battle)field is now full of diverse newcomers: international reporters, some of whom tend to repeat the patterns of insensitive exploitation of the local traumatised sources, and new fixers, many of whom are in precarious positions. On the other hand, we can observe in real time how the general awareness of Ukraine's existence and journalists' knowledge of the context is increasing – which goes hand in hand with greater emotional involvement – and how fixers are becoming more and more resistant and self-organised (Dovzhyk 2022). This means that the 'emotional gap' described in the next section may now be potentially wider and more obvious, or, on the contrary, almost completely obscured.

The Emotional Gap: Locals' engagement, foreigners' detachment

> There is the emotional gap between an international journalist who comes for one week to a country which . . . [he or she] little cares about, and understandably so. . . . this is the toughest, one of the toughest things in fixing. This emotional connection that you feel with people around you and much less emotional connection of people you work with. . . . there was cleavage, a whole cleavage between people who come from outside with very little degree of compassion and us, who were, you know, inside the story. (Albert, Ukrainian journalist and ex-fixer)

Most media professionals I talked to perceive a similar cleavage. On the one hand, there are local or locally based media professionals – fixers, producers, photographers, permanent correspondents and stringers – who are emotionally and/or intellectually engaged in the context. On the other hand, there are foreign reporters with their relative distance. Some locals feel they 'can relate more than a foreigner coming from the USA or London' (Vira, Ukrainian stringer and producer), intellectually and emotionally. By contrast, based on the interviews and also my previous research (Kotišová 2019; see also Jukes 2017), many foreign reporters on short stays cherish their ability to keep their distance. In what follows, I will thus look into the gap and then address the narrated consequences of this gap for the newsmaking process and its ethics.

Local media professionals often feel emotionally close to the violence in their community (Al-Ghazzi 2023). Their affective proximity to the suffering of their fellow citizens and sometimes families makes it difficult, almost impossible, to stay unemotional and disinvolved (see also Budivska and Orlova 2017): 'I have feelings. . . . You know, with the personal stories with the people here, with this situation, I don't think it's possible to be neutral' (Valentin, Ukrainian fixer).

Thus, the Ukrainian interviewees' narratives are often infused with compassion and pity for victims and survivors of the war violence, anger towards the occupying forces and their proxies, and overall sadness about the complex situation in their country. I have also witnessed locals' anger with foreign reporters and sense of 'shame . . . [of participating in] some news report that I can feel, you know, that's not really good' (Olena, Ukrainian photographer and ex-fixer).

All these emotions are particularly insistent and difficult to filter out because of the character of production or fixing jobs that, like other media

jobs, require the practitioner 'to be committed well beyond what any profession could ask for' (Deuze and Witschge 2018: 176). Emma, Ukrainian fixer and producer, explained: 'it's more personal maybe, because fixer job it's a little bit more than just a job. It's more things involved, it's part of life. Your life.'

The war zone in the east of Ukraine, the job *inherent* to the war, and also the then contrasting relative peace in the rest of the country completely absorbs some of my interviewees:

> I live through the war and peace, I live through this conflict, as I'm a part of it, and it's a part of me . . .. And when you travel between the territory in war and the territory in peace, especially in the beginning, I felt such a big difference, one second you are in the trenches, and you are being shot at and everything, and then a few hours later, you sit on the terrace in a nice city, and people are wearing white trousers . . . When you travel through the territory in war and the territory in peace, then you have this difference, you feel this difference, you feel the reality, and – what is my reality? Is it war? Or is it peace? And I feel that every time I'm in the peace territory, I know I have to go back. Sometimes when I'm there, and the situation is dangerous, sometimes I think, what the hell am I doing here? Why can't I get another job or something? . . . But the conflict is actually, it's holding me. (Aleks, Ukrainian producer, fixer and filmmaker)

For some, one reason for this absorption and the need to always go back to Donbas is a 'testosterone addiction' (Artem, producer). In the calmer Kyiv, Artem keeps sneezing and is depressed. By comparison, Inna and Vira said they simply like and are lured back by the warmth of the Donbas people.

In some cases, this immersion in the context on several different levels and the need to get the job done can lead the locals to suppress their emotions (see below) or result in self-reported trauma. Vera says that 'Most of us, we have PTSD or trauma' and Inna, Ukrainian stringer and fixer, explains: 'We have been talking with lots of people who had been tortured . . . it's something that really influences you.' Frans, a permanent foreign reporter, explains that processing graphic scenes is probably more difficult for fixers than for other media professionals who 'externalise' the witnessed scenes into a discourse: 'When there is the MH17, and when you see pieces of bodies of children, . . . for a fixer, it's . . . difficult because they don't have the capacity to externalize these feelings that they have. Because they don't write.'

Moreover, producers and fixers most often work either as freelancers or informally, without any contract, protection, or insurance; the precarious conditions force them to hide the potential trauma, which, in turn, easily turns taboo or simply is not discussed and remains unresolved:

> We do not talk about it because – would you hire me if you . . . let's say you work for the BBC, you are an editor of the BBC, would you take a piece from a traumatized journalist? (Vira)
>
> Reporters without newsrooms, they have no place to talk. . . . in covering conflict and covering trauma, talking and sharing your experience . . . is super critical, is the probably . . . the only, the most important thing. (Inna)

The combination of the war, the media professionals' emotional immersion, and the lack of support for local freelance collaborators creates a fertile ground for trauma and other mental-health issues indeed. In 2018, a survey (IMI 2019) revealed that 97 per cent of Ukrainian freelance journalists had symptoms which could indicate depression, despite 86 per cent of the respondents stating that they were looking after their psychological and emotional condition.

By contrast, the foreign reporters, especially those on a short-stay, who have either experienced many conflicts and are emotionally blunted or who spend very little time in the country, invest relatively less emotional energy:

> If you are attached to their stories, you can't really move on, you know, to the next thing. . . . as time went on and I got more experience doing it, I just approached it more like a job. (Roman, UK-based filmmaker)
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> One of the things that I'm good at is distancing myself from the story . . . I'm always there as a reporter and almost never there as a person. . . . of course, you have feelings and stuff, but it comes after you come home. (Mate, European crisis reporter)

As the quotes suggest, foreign reporters see their relative distance as being both shaped and required by their professional motivation, as a necessary professional circumstance or even a professional quality. To successfully perform their job, they suspend or suppress their immediate emotional reactions to otherwise emotionally disturbing experiences – which is a typical form of emotional labour among reporters covering (distant) crises and trauma (Jukes 2017; Kotišová 2019).

Ukrainian media professionals understand that a journalist 'doesn't always have the capacity to personally, deeply, profoundly live through each story' (Olena) and that foreign journalists and media companies stay 'very distant to the conflict' (Pavlo, Ukrainian producer and photographer) as a survival mechanism beneficial to productivity. They acknowledge that foreign journalists 'did a fantastic job, by the way, mainly because of their detachment from the context' (Albert). However, Albert also criticises the cynical detachment of those who come to Ukraine to boost their career and who instrumentalise their sources: 'that, you can feel it very easily . . . from a kind of this easy-going

attachment' and lack of genuine interest in and respect for sources. Similar criticism of foreign reporters' 'fast food journalism' – stories produced quickly with artificial ingredients (Hoxha and Andresen 2019) – and their lack of empathy also appears in previous research on local producers and fixers (Bishara 2006; Khan 2019).

Shielding the local sources, filtering the message

As the dominant discourse on professionalism and objectivity in journalism involves the contrasts of objectivity and subjectivity, rationality and emotionality (e.g. Stupart 2021; Van Zoonen 1998), this emotional gap and the greater affective proximity among Ukrainians is sometimes interpreted by foreign reporters as potentially leading to bias and prejudice: 'You, like, feel right away that they will think, you are just Ukrainians, so you can't really . . . Your opinion is like biased or whatever' (Olena). Such mistrust and unfavourable interpretation of the locals' affective proximity can be seen as epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). Epistemic injustice occurs when a person is not trusted based on their group identity (Ukrainians; fixers) without distinguishing and knowing more about the approach of the individual person.

In reality, my interviewees who are successful in the field very consciously compartmentalise different components of their emotions: they separate their affective dimension (what they immediately feel) from their cognition, opinions (what they know and think about the war) and behaviour (i.e. which sources they suggest to interview). This strict emotional labour distinguishes local media fixers from other local content-creating eyewitnesses, such as citizens, activists, or soldiers, who often communicate their immediate emotional reactions (Mortensen 2015). It also points directly to the paradox between the normative constructions of journalism and the moral implications of witnessing (Pantti 2019), since the compartmentalisation of one's emotions is an attempt to overcome this paradox. My Ukrainian interviewees often know how to deal with it: their affect, opinion/knowledge, and behaviour do not necessarily correspond. Pavlo explains: 'When I translate, I don't care about my own thoughts. I'm just translating word by word what people say. That's the most important. That's the job I'm hired for.' Thus, the suspicion that local media professionals hold prejudices that undesirably affect their work often stays only theoretical. Sam, having been based in Ukraine for some years, says: 'I'm not

sure if I've ever needed to like have a conversation with anyone about it in Ukrainian context.' Even reporters who did meet fixers trying to push their agenda, were confident that they were able to recognise the potential ideological pressure: '. . . some ideological things or things like that, I am actually quite sensitive to that' (Joseph, European reporter).

Quite the opposite: the emotional gap is often valued by both the locals and the foreigners. It is seen as an opportunity for the locals and foreigners to learn from each other and eventually reach a collaborative form of objectivity where local fixers provide their detailed, embodied knowledge of the war and its history, while foreign reporters provide greater perspective and transnational experience (Kotišová 2023). Moreover, most interviewees who find the capacity to get emotionally involved also recognise some benefits of such involvement for their work. 'If you want to make real stuff, you need to find the emotional capacity to, to internalize it somehow. And become part of the story,' Albert thinks.

Even Mate, who praises his ability to stay detached, sees emotionality as a driving force and a part of the reality on the ground. Thus, the emotional gap usually becomes a starting point for the outsourcing of empathy to the local newsworkers. These fixers and producers spend their emotional energy on persuading people to let the foreign journalists visit or film them, only to explain to the same sources later why the journalists lost interest and are not going to come (Albert). They filter the journalists' exploitative and disrespectful behaviour towards the local sources (Olena) by showing genuine gratitude for their time and stories. They rephrase pushy questions into more cautious ones (Valentin) and soften the communication:

> There is a big difference in terms of, in the way how you speak to people. The journalist is bad, and you are good, you come to a person, and the journalist kind of fooled himself into asking a bad question, and you are the one who softens things. (Inna)

Vira explains the 'softening' – and thus 'shielding' – process in detail while also hinting at its consequences for herself:

VIRA: I also learned by doing how to interview people without traumatizing them. . . . When you work often with people who live on the front line, you filter questions the journalist asks. So you become that shield that separates. . . and take all the harm on yourself. I remember in 2014/15 how it affected me. People just lost their home or their kin, and I have to get all this heat, and then I filter it and translate it to a journalist.

JOHANA: And, like, while you are applying this filter, do you somehow moderate the
            tone, do you somehow change the message or?
VIRA: . . . quite often, the question was very traumatic. Not political, but quite often
            just traumatic. You've just lost somebody, and I would say: how did you lose your
            husband? (Smiles) You maybe still didn't realize that you lost somebody close
            to you, so there is always a way to transform the question in order to not. . .
JOHANA: How do you ask?
VIRA: Depends on the situation, I mean, what did happen, or where have you been,
            like you never pronounce actually . . . It depends on the situation. It's a very
            emotional thing that you learn by doing.

The retraumatisation of sources is nothing rare in media reporting on crises
and tragedies (Haravuori et al. 2017; Thoresen et al. 2014), and empathy com-
ing either from the local or the foreign journalists seemed to help avoid it
throughout the data.

Locals' detachment, foreigners' engagement?

So far, I have retained the terms 'local' and 'foreign' in order to analytically
distinguish between actors who originate in Ukraine, thus having more
social, political, and ethnic ties to the country, and actors who were orig-
inally 'outsiders' and needed to acquire and/or outsource local knowledge
(Palmer 2018; 2019). However, the duality of emotional locals and detached,
cynical foreigners by no means works perfectly. The very 'local' and 'for-
eign' distinction is rough and does not reflect the media professionals' com-
plex identities and personal histories. The affective proximity/distance to
the conflict is co-shaped by this complexity: some of my interviewees have
lived or worked in several different countries, some have partners from
Russia or Ukraine, all of which make the war more distant or closer. In
other words, the complexity of identities brings into play additional forms
of proximity to those based on one's direct involvement in the affected
community: physical/spatial, geographical, or social-ideological proximity
(Ahva and Pantti 2014).

     Thus, some reporters who were not born and raised in Ukraine but had
many personal ties on the ground or who were physically very close to the
war – threatened, detained, and interrogated in Donbas – could 'lose' their
distance:

A friend went to fight, and I watched him fighting and hoped he would survive.
... Listening to what happens there was sometimes painful. (Michael, European
reporter)

   When I entered Sloviansk, I had chills because it was the first time that I was
   afraid, that I was fearing violence ... I had the impression that they were ready to
   cut my head, there was something totally cold in the air, cool violence, which I had
   never seen on Maidan. (Frans)

Their closeness sometimes stirs up criticism for 'going native' (Hamilton and
Tworek 2019), being too close, too moved by the Maidan revolution – exactly
as with the epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) surrounding fixers' emotional
involvement.

   Vice versa, local media professionals with experience from other conflicts
(Halyna, Ukrainian journalist and fixer), having worked a long time in the
conflict zone (Pavlo, Valentin), being based far from the east (in Kyiv), having
too many assignments (Olena) or focusing on getting the job done (Emma) can
be less emotionally connected to the conflict. For example, Pavlo claims: 'The
story that I'm the person of this region is not triggering me anymore. ... you
still need to keep this distance, you know. Because otherwise, the war will
eat you.'

   To stay emotionally stable, some local producers even have thought-
through strategies of reducing the proximity: for example, Pavlo deliberately
distances himself from the conflict by being careful not to make friends in the
war zone. His detachment and focus on professionalism, like that of Valentin
or Andriy, is thus a result of a very similar type of emotional labour performed
by the foreign reporters. Furthermore, one person can experience the same
situation in diverse ways depending on whether they are covering it as a fixer,
as a reporter, or as an editor. As Halyna puts it, 'Emotional involvement is very
different depending on what I represent.'

   All these specific experiences reduce the universality of the emotional gap.
This shows how being 'local' vs 'foreign' to Ukraine (at a certain moment) is
in many cases an inadequately strict division and forms only one of the many
identity markers that determine affective proximity.

Conclusion

This chapter explores an essential dimension of the complex transnational
conflict reporting ecosystem in Ukraine. I argue that the collaboration between
foreign and local media professionals covering the Russian–Ukrainian war is

characterised by a perceived 'emotional gap' that varies according to higher and lower levels of affective proximity. This gap is often understood as beneficial to reporting practices and ethics. However, it is far from universal, as the very categories of 'local' and 'foreign' become blurred and as affective proximity depends on a variety of identity markers and their corresponding proximities.

I describe how news fixing and production are permeated by the performance of emotional labour and work, which sheds new light on the importance of local newsworkers. This distribution of emotional work, including the responsibility for the ethical treatment of locals, reflects the still powerful discursive construction of objectivity, detachment, and rationality as opposed to subjectivity and emotionality (e.g. Stupart 2021; Van Zoonen 1998), and the privilege of the former. In this logic, the rational foreign subject subjugates the local (emotionally informed) knowledge by dismissing or exploiting it. The first option, dismissal, corresponds to epistemic injustice, that is, not trusting Ukrainians to be professional enough (Fricker 2007). The second option, exploitation, corresponds to the outsourcing of empathy as an aspect of fixers' immaterial labour (Creech 2018; Khan 2019). Empathy, an indispensable part of good journalism (Glück 2016), is an ability linked to proximity (Ahva and Pantti 2014); therefore, the locals may be seen as better predisposed to 'supply' this element of good journalism.

Thus, while this chapter follows the trend of seeing emotion as potentially beneficial to reporting and journalistic ethics (e.g. Stupart 2022), the reproduction of this power dynamic makes a positive outlook on emotional involvement problematic. First, the practice of 'shielding' local sources has its counterpart in the exploitation and potential traumatisation of the fixers and producers. Second, their emotional work can be easily abused for the opposite effect. Vira told me about a famous photographer who asked her to coerce a man who had just lost his house into tears: 'he wanted me to push on him. So that the man would be crying for the camera.' Although Vira did not follow the request, this example shows that the emotional gap does not necessarily have a beneficial effect on reporting ethics. At worst, it can turn fixers into components of an exploitation chain consisting of foreign editors, staff reporters, freelance collaborators, local fixers, producers, and sources.

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