

# HOW EXPERIENCE BECOMES A JOURNALISTIC ASSET? A LOCAL REPORTER'S PERSPECTIVE TO UNDERSTAND CONFLICT-SENSITIVE REPORTING IN THE TROUBLED PASHTUN BELT OF PAKISTAN

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## Introduction

In a previous paper (in Press), we adopted a critical theory approach to argue that the model of *objective* journalism, while laying emphasis on neutrality and detachment, disconnects local reporters, in conflict scenario, from feeling the pain of their own ethnic community. Therefore, the *objectivity* model was found too simple to help ethnic Pashtun journalists know occupational intricacies of conflict-sensitive reporting in Pakistan's northwestern terror-hit areas, a site for the U.S-led so-called global war on terror. Using phenomenology as a method, I take this argument further and offer my shared journalistic experience as a resource to establish that *objectivity* obfuscates power politics involved in text production while promoting an ahistorical culture. This is done through objectifying the local reporter's relationship with the troubled site of occurrence (field), a relationship in which a reporter is made insensitive to his own presence as an ethnic body standing at a highly militarized political site to get him focused more on looking at reality through the detached lens of neutral observer. Objectify here means that they look at reality not from the human perspective but usually prefer to project aspects of reality using *objectivity* as a measuring rod to access facts. Using the commercial framework of objective reporting might give a text (news story) an economically-desired impersonal form. But the urge for *neutrality* and *impartiality* neither can solve the crisis of reporting nor can control a journalist's bias by

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discouraging his/her feelings, emotions, and subjectivity. In Pakistan, local reporters not only provide gory spectacles of a conflict which has, according to official figures, consumed over 50,000 lives and displaced millions predominantly in the Pashtun Belt; but the journalists also are getting increasingly vulnerable to violence. This paper argues that neutrality is a challenge in conflict reporting on one's own community much the same way as attachment is a sin in objective model of commercial journalism.

The papers do not discuss power nor does it want to examine in totality the 'objective' paradigm of news constructions. Instead, this paper is looking at the role of *objectivity* in the light of my journalistic experience and observations, a phenomenological perspective focused on the local reporters' use of 'objectivity', a unique situation in which a local ethnic community is not just the target of global violence and State discrimination, but the reporting of this violence by the local reporters also contributes to victimization of the victims. Borrowing words from the French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1981), the phenomenological approach adopted here agrees "to compromise with a power, [but] *affect*; affect was what I didn't want to reduce" (p, 21). This is what I wish to highlight with the help of my shared experience as a local reporter who reported on the war from 2006 to 2010.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the media structure in the war-hit Pashtun Belt, a troubled site for the essence of my experience. The second section lays emphasis on the lack of local perspective in scholarly literature, identifying how *objectivity* as a framework influences a local reporter's material conditions, undermining reality at the site of occurrence. Offering two concert exemplars, the third section shares my experience, identifying how "objectivity" model addresses the crisis of Pashtun representation, raising the need for invoking journalism that could humanize local Pashtun community's pain. Concluding analyses of the paper lays emphasis on self-reflection as journalistic asset in war reporting. This section recommends ways in which to make local journalists responsive to community issues in troubled Pashtun Belt, and in conflict-riddled parts of the world.

### **Media in the Pashtun Belt: An Overview**

Pashtuns are organized as a multi-tribal society, an estimated population of a combined over 40 million, who are scattered in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Pakistan, Pashtuns mainly live in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA)—a region straddling the British delineated Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan—and the Pakhtunkhwa province, a geographical and demographic stretch of vast mountainous borderland I call here the "Pashtun Belt".

In 2001, the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban fighters crossed over from Afghanistan into the Pashtun Belt, which was followed by a number of U.S.-sponsored Pakistani military's operations, a part of the US-led global War on Terrorism. Resultantly, the Pashtun Belt became a global flashpoint. As the war began to escalate, Pakistan announced media deregulation policy in 2002. Over ninety licenses were issued to private TV channels, while 28 foreign media networks were given landing rights to open their offices in Pakistan and rely their programs from there. As many as 106 FM radio stations were issued licenses. This rise in the number of media houses and outlets also increased the number of journalists in Pakistan. A rough estimate I collected from media experts in Peshawar and Islamabad said that before 2002 about 2000 journalists were working in Pakistan, which increased to around 20,000 in 2018, of which about 1,622 worked in the Pashtun belt.

Traditionally, the State's military interests has always discouraged the emergence of ethnic media in Pashtun Belt, a vast stretch of bordering land part of which the State uses for military purpose to exercises strategic influence over its neighboring Afghanistan. Subjecting the airwaves privatization to security interests of the State reinforced the status quo despite the mushrooming media channels, at least it was true in the selective allocation of media rights barring Pashtuns from owning the means of symbolic representation. In 2004, for instance, the first Pashtu-language TV channel was launched by a non-Pashtun from Islamabad, the federal capital. In 2017, Mashriq TV was the only channel launched from Peshawar, but it was owned by a non-Pashtun baron. The lack of enough Pashtun representation in the media political economy also affected ethnic reporters of Pashtun origin, who worked for media networks stationed outside the conflict zone. As working conditions of media labor is a blind spot of communication studies the world over<sup>1</sup> therefore, not much has been written about the implications of this discrimination over the Pashtun journalists. Pashtun reporters/journalists here means Pashtu speaking ethnic reporters who represented local journalism in the Pashtun Belt. This lack of ownership thus curtailed the local reporters' strength, affecting their voice at the national level, and making for them hard to carry out critical reporting—an oppositional form of journalism which speaks truth to power—to highlight agony of their own ethnic community. The challenges of conflict-sensitive reporting, therefore, are unique enough to invite attention toward local ethnic reporters' position and contribution in the field, to examine those

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<sup>1</sup> Mosco, Vincent. "Communication and Cultural Labour." *The renewal of cultural studies*. (2011): 230-237.

conditions under which local journalists carry out reporting on violence against their own local community.

### **Conflicts and Wars: The Local Perspective**

Conflict-sensitive reporting has always attracted scholarly attention the world over.<sup>2</sup> But the available work either predominantly deals with the corporate media working in the Western context<sup>3</sup>, or highlights the consequences of war for elite Western journalists.<sup>4</sup> How racial stories tend to be reported against a flimsiest background and how unverified stories are deliberately projected ignoring evidence which does not fit into the existing media biases are also a rich topic of Western media research.<sup>5</sup> What is missing, however, is a local dimension to examine frontline journalism. Especially, in conflict scenario, local journalists' perceptions and field contributions do not find a place in researches on global or local media.

One category of local work focused upon in academic literature is called fixer. Local journalists working in a subservient role, i.e., fixers and stringers, are generally described as being hired on an as-needed basis in reporting on wars, daily wage earners who report on their own people for global media outlets. Fixers are generally defined as sub-contractors who greet foreign reporters on their arrival, arrange for them interviews with local experts, and translate local language.<sup>6</sup> Providing "protection" for foreign journalists, local reporters in their global role as "fixers" also are considered "doing the shopping for their journalists" and—if necessary—"negotiation with kidnappers".<sup>7</sup>

This local role is also defined primarily in terms of fixers/local reporters relationship with foreign correspondents, mostly Western and U.S. war journalists.<sup>8</sup> In countries like Pakistan, however, the situation is

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<sup>2</sup> Allan, Stuart. "Conflicting Truths: Online News and the War in Iraq." *International News in the 21st Century*. Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2004: 285-99.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, Piers. *The Cnn Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention*: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Rodgers, James. *Reporting Conflict*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Braham, Peter. "How the Media Report Race." In *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by T. Bennett M. Gurevitch, J. Curran and J. Woollacott, Menthuen: Routledge, 2005: 274-293.

<sup>6</sup> Erickson, Emily, and John Maxwell Hamilton. "Foreign Reporting Enhanced by Parachute Journalism." *Newspaper Research Journal* 27, no. 1, 2006: 33-47

<sup>7</sup> Palmer, Jerry, and Victoria Fontan. "'Our Ears and Our Eyes' Journalists and Fixers in Iraq." *Journalism* 8, no. 1, 2007: 5-24

<sup>8</sup> Kramp, Leif, and Stephan Weichert. "Covering the World in Despair: A Survey of German Crisis Reporters." *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 7, no. 1, 2014: 18-35

different. Growing insecurity has restricted foreign reporters from visiting the country's violence-hit bordering areas, raising the local journalists' importance and need. Hence, the national and global media hire local journalists as fixers and reporters who report on a conflict zone which is also their home station, a site that juxtaposes their family life and work routines. On the one hand, the local reporters are trained in *objectivity*, a professional ideology that bars reporters to define news from the perspective of local affiliations. On the other hand, the term fixers and local reporters themselves identify reduced occupational statuses: Fixers are hired for their accessibility to the troubled zone and are kept mainly for providing data and quotes to feed media outlets stationed outside the conflict zone. While the national media engaged local reporters but do not pay them enough to make both ends meet. Such challenges undermine local reporters' agency, raising chances of their manipulation by visiting foreign journalists and media outlets stationed outside the conflict zone. Owing to lack of scholarly attention, however, such challenges receive less attention because of which media labor could be rightly called the blind spot of communication research.

Despite the post-9/11surge in scholarly work on wartime journalism, understanding conflict-sensitive reporting is still associated with the "normative professional ideal of Anglo-American journalism".<sup>9</sup> Because of the traditional models of war reporting, professionalism in journalism undermines local reporters' social origin along with objectifying their relationship with the site of occurrence. This uncritical reception turns *objective* reporting merely into a collection of "facts", which, then, ignores that "facts do not exist on their own but are located within wide-ranging sets of assumptions", and therefore, "which facts are thought to be relevant to a story depends on which sets of assumptions are held".<sup>10</sup> Not just that this objective journalistic approach fails to see the context of these "facts" but believing in a set of assumptions based on already existing presupposition also reinforces a news framework, i.e., *objectivity*, which are open to distortion to uphold ruling class interests. In embedded journalism, for instance, military represents an unaccountable power controlling information flow to/from the conflict zone, a captive form of journalism in which reporters' compromise on truth in a bid to ensure their access to war-related events. As the bulk of researchers generally ignore conditions under which

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<sup>9</sup> Deacon, David. *British News Media and the Spanish Civil War: Tomorrow May Be Too Late*: Edinburgh University Press, 2008

<sup>10</sup> Braham, Peter. "How the Media Report Race." In *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by T. Bennett M. Gurevitch, J. Curran and J. Woollacott, Menthuen., 274-293: Routledge, 2005

news production is carried out,<sup>11</sup> truth is usually the first causality of war: an event in a war may be reported not as it happens, but the quoting of sources and representation of evidence at the site of tragedy may become an exercise in mass deception, contributing to perpetuating violence not just against local people but also against a reporter. Understanding *objectivity*'s implications thus invite attention toward local reporters and their conditions of work, a gap this paper aims to identify in conflict scenario adopting phenomenological approach.

### Why Phenomenology?

Phenomenological approach is concerned with personal experience, highlighting taken for granted general assumptions. This method, however, attaches equal attention to structural assumptions describing them through the lens of personal observations attaching primacy to emotional attachment, and individual perceptions. "Whereas a narrative study reports the life of a *single individual*, a *phenomenological study* describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon"<sup>12</sup> Even sentiments and emotions, as part of shared experience, become an experiential asset to learn from.

Roland Barthes (1981) in his classic work *Camera Lucida* explained his personal sentiments as part of a phenomenological approach to show his feelings for the photograph of his ancestors. Barthes (1981) argues, "As a *spectator* I was interested in photography only for 'sentimental reasons;' I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think" (p. 21). In the same way, my interest in using phenomenology is mainly because it allows me to heal my wound by sharing my experiences. Partly because of my sentimental attachment with journalism, both as a teacher and as a reporter, and mainly because I found *objectivity* a threat to the spirit of Pashtun journalists and the interests of the community. Like Barthes, my feelings for my community of origin compelled me to abandon 'detachment' and 'neutrality' so as to make reporting a basis for sharing common cause and pain.

My own experiential understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism started in 2003, the year when I joined as a journalism faculty teaching in a public sector university in Pashtun Belt. War on Terror had started in Afghanistan in 2001, and the U.S bombing of Al-Qaida fighters had forced the latter to cross over into Pakistan's Pashtun Belt. Every weekend on way from the university to my family home in Kohat district, I had to pass

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 273

<sup>12</sup> Creswell, John , and Oaks Thousand. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches*: Sage Publications, 2007

through check points set up by military and militants. Crippling effects of the U.S funded counter-terror operations turned local people lives into a collateral damage, a loss that often went unnoticed in the national and international media. Along with teaching, my participation in a community-dialogue project of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) helped me to interact with common people who were caught in this existential struggle. Working in a changed paradigm helped me to mix not only with the troubled people of my ethnic community, it also led me to feel for them, an empathy I did not develop before working as an objective journalist. Gradually I began to transform my neutrality into attachment, not in the political context but in the emotional sense of the word. I do not plead here 'activism', and 'advocacy'; I believe that all these are visibly inclined towards political ends, which means extending service to groups, factions, parties or the state. My sense of attachment was the cultural and social outcome of embodied experience that invited constant reflection from me in my spare moments. Like Barthes, I wanted to explore my community as a wound, not just as a question (a theme). Unlike Barthes, however, I was not a spectator. I was an insider, a terror victim who wanted to examine his social wound from a position of some power as a social actor.

To give voice to my troubled ethnic community, I joined a national TV channel DawnNews in 2006. Working on this victim-agent position capacitated me to shed off those ideological blinders which I have grown as postcolonial subject, the schooling outcome of my long organizational social learning. Regular interacting with the social wound developed in me the capacity to think and reflect. What is happening all around me? Why only Pashtuns? The invocation of self-reflective faculties grounded me within an irreducible experience, a consciousness that gradually turned into a site of unification for the origin of my culture and the culture of my professional orientation. As an apparent outcome of a genuine desire, the gradual occupational change could be called as an urge to abrogate the functional rules of occupational engagement called *professionalism*. Such rules lie at the base of a reporters' cynicism towards feeling the pain of people who are reduced in objective journalism to an impersonal and amoral status of no less than a data bank, i.e., sound bites and news quotes. Boasting about rubbing shoulders with military generals on embedded trips, one local journalist, who worked for a large television channel, once put it this way to me: "Only a fool can afford to skip free chopper rides and the hot food offered on such trips to FATA or Swat." "What would they eat once the 'war on terror' ends?" This is what I often heard from desperate colleagues working in lowly status as free lance journalists and fixers. This uncritical and fatalistic approach questions a reporters' modus operandi, ethical responsibility and conceptual understanding of reporting. To know more

about this new phase of commercial journalism in Pakistan, I latter began to write newspaper columns.<sup>13</sup> For confirmation of news reports, I used to remain in direct contact with the national-level and the local-level military spokesmen and political leaders that helped me to develop some know-how about the political economy of news making in the Pashtun Belt. Apart from invoking my personal experience, this paper is based on a data from the year 2007 to 2010 which I recorded in three note books based on which I wrote over 50 articles for prestigious national English newspaper, *Dawn* (Ashraf 2008-10).

### **The Crisis of Representation: *Facticity* Robs Context**

I have noted that the local reporters' portrayal of the Pashtun Belt oscillates between total indifference and selective exposure. In the first case, everyday lived experience is generally ignored and life is painted through the brush of history. Whatever attention common people receive is tainted with the framework of aged-old stereotypes such as "tribesmen", "gharatmand qabail" (brave tribesmen), "deeply religious society", "elaqa ghair" (no-goarea), "information blackhole" etc. Such platitudes identify Pashtuns more with their "tough" geography and less as people with flesh and bones, justifying Pakistani state's use of heavy force. In not-so-normal circumstances, however, the media coverage remains selective in which emphasis is laid on a wider regional context to highlight strategic significance of the borderland. This security-centric approach shifts the attention away from the Pashtun Belt, obscuring consequences of the U.S.-led "war on terror." Even local reporters could not help to challenge this selective exposure. In their search on bare *facts*, which are offered to them in press conferences and military briefings, local reporters often fail to investigate those conditions in which *facts* emerge to become news in the first place. Yet, whenever I talked to them about these issues, most of the local reporters took pride in doing what they called *objective journalism*, a reporting that revolves around neutrality and detachment. Instead of challenging an existing social order, however, I found technical rationality impairing journalists' reflective capacity in a sense that their belief in neutrality provides them with an excuse to avoid critical reporting, leaving them to be content with mass communication gadgets and the conceptual framework of *objectivity*.

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<sup>13</sup> I joined *DawnNews*, a premier Pakistan-based English language TV channel, which aired current affairs programs for a couple of years after which it was converted into Urdu language. I quit working with the channel in 2009 to start free-lance reporting.



An eerie reflection was the scene staged in the year 2009 at the security forces' headquarters in Saidu Sharif, Swat. In my presence, six teenagers with trembling hands, half-covered pale faces and shabby clothes, were paraded by military officials before a group of media men at the heavily barricaded Army Circuit House. Around half a dozen Digital Satellite News Gathering vehicles were parked outside, connected to production staff in big cities of Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore. The military arranged such events to brief local reporters on their military operations. Because of increasing insecurity, foreign journalists were barred from entering the valley and even the country's national media was dependent on local reporters, whose significance laid in their knowledge about the local context of war-related stories. For example, the local reporters apparently knew that the boys, which the military were parading, had deserted the Swat militants after getting a few days of forced training sessions. Later, the children's parents willingly handed them over to the security forces to avoid the wrath of intelligence agencies. Yet, the military side prevailed, claiming that the teenagers were recovered in a timely military operation that saved them from turning into suicide bombers. No sooner had the press conference ended, the media men rushed out to connect to their Digital Satellite News Gatherings (DSNG), a chaotic scene, indeed. How to be first with the news was the main issue at hand. Before the journalists could get into their live DSNGs, a few reporters were asked by their producers to announce that the children were would-be suicide bombers. The reason? One channel had already flashed a ticker branding them as such. Some of the rest had to follow citing military and police as their sources, a cacophony in which a couple of voices, which tried to reveal the truth, were lost.

The exchange value of terrorism begins to turn into a political capital. The following week, on July 27, a senior parliamentarian, Bashir Bilour, exaggerated the figures in his TV interview saying that the government, in fact, had arrested "200 brainwashed children who had been trained for suicide bombing" (Geo TV 2009). The issue caused a stir. The national and international media began to digest unverified facts. The politician was on air almost everywhere.<sup>14</sup> After two weeks of waiting to see if the army spokesman would release any clarification, this issue of local importance got my attention. After inquiry, I came to know that the Swati people were silent because they feared that the law enforcement authorities

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<sup>14</sup> Former Senior Minister of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province Bashir Bilour escaped many suicide attacks. Later, however, he was killed in one such attack when "a suicide bomber detonated the explosives strapped to his body at a close distance from Bashir Bilour, inflicting critical wounds to his chest and stomach that later proved FATA" (The News, 2012)

would make the brainwashed children an excuse to carry out raids on their houses, which would further add to the increasing numbers of missing persons or extra-judicial killing at the hands of authorities. Following a lead from my inquiry in Swat, I talked to the Pakistan Army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas, who accepted in his ‘off the record’ conversation with me that the news was fabricated. The general said that announcement of the news on national television made him perturbed. “How could the army produce 200 would-be suicide bombers if the foreign media insisted on producing them before the cameras? Nobody apparently had a clue to it! Surprisingly, the local military office in Swat also did not issue any clarification despite accepting that the information was wrong. General Abbas confided to me later on phone that “a clarification would have resulted in a confrontation with the political government.”

In retrospect, a serious probe on the part of a single journalist in Peshawar could have met the requirements of responsible reporting.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the media men were not interested in verifying their information—although news from conflict zones is indeed hard to confirm as it is always accompanied by confusion. Some journalists in Peshawar, whom I talked to later, believe that this was part of a conspiracy to retain the element of sensation in the conflict zones of the ‘hot Frontier,’ a global flash point. As media sensationalism could potentially stimulate a war economy by creating the need for a military action, local reporting apparently serves to extend the cause of militarization pleading neutrality in the already troubled Pashtun Belt.

What is shown to reporters is considered enough an evidence to avoid looking into the context, a form of local journalism in which military propaganda rules over truth. For example, to explain the sensational nature of reporting in the Pashtun Belt, Bill Roggio in his report for *The Long War Journal* website wrote about the incident of 200 brain-washed children and sarcastically connected it to previous examples of sensational reporting:

Once I saw that NWFP (former name of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province) senior minister Balour and Major General Athar Abbas were the primary sources, red lights flashed. When the *The Times Online* claimed the Swat Taliban had kidnapped nearly 1,500 child suicide bombers, alarm bells were ringing. The Swat Taliban are estimated to have had 7,000 fighters maximum. Depending on how you do the math, this would make child suicide bombers equal to 18 to 21 percent of the Swat Taliban’s forces. That is preposterous on its face.

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Though a single press conference arranged by military in Swat cannot be held a representative sample to understand the national and international media reporting of the war in the Pashtun Belt, yet sensational patterns of media coverage do carry an instructive value, a common theme in local journalism. Using such pattern as a lens could help provide insight into the impersonal and detached way the military, militants and journalists play on civilians' sensitivities, already been pushed to the center of a tragic humanitarian crisis.

The local reporters' apparent indifference to understand this challenge cannot be explained without looking into the market value of this conflict, a local trend giving birth to objectification of violence—to explain violence without humanizing the actual social cost. One warm evening, for instance, I was passing through the overcrowded parts of the Peshawar city area along with a few journalist friends when the deafening sound of an explosion invited our attention towards Qissa Khwani, a centuries old bazar in Peshawar. Reaching over there, we found a yawning crater surrounded by fire and smoke; it was a suicide blast which left scores of dead or injured. Some of the injured cried for help, others just sat there stunned with body parts missing. Still others were in mutilated pieces, reduced to greasy smithereens. Breathing with difficulty in a thick dusty air which was filled with sickening smell of burnt flash, I stood in a state of stupor by the dimly lit narrow wall. Despite my efforts to move away from the gory scene, my local journalist friends asked me not to go: they want me to help them with holding gadgets in their bid to talk to their respective newsrooms. In other words, they were waiting for a live phone talk from their media outlets to explain the tragic scene standing at the site of occurrence.

In TV journalism, a journalist who is first on the scene understands very well how destruction can become a commodity for sale, a hidden economics of mass media which have long been the subject of intense scholarly debate since early 1970s. After examining financial control in media industries, for example, a few Marxist scholars<sup>16</sup> connected media ownership to the business of selling audience to advertisers, a much contested argument leading to a heated debate in 1970s.<sup>17</sup> The debate focused on how information craving by people made violence a productive

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<sup>16</sup> Yorke, Dane. "The Radio Octopus." *American Mercury* 23, no. 38, 1931: 16

<sup>17</sup> Smythe, Dallas W. "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism." *Canadian Journal of Political & Social Theory* 1, no. 3, 1997: 1-27 & Murdock, Graham. "Blindspots About Western Marxism: A Reply to Dallas Smythe." *Canadian Journal of Political & Social Theory* 2, no. 2, 1978: 109-115.

source for commercial media. More threatening is a commercial culture related to the objectification of conflict-sensitive journalism. Many times I have noted my journalist colleagues ignoring their own safety in their bid to be first with the news, a practice called “breaking news” in which information is presented as a ‘hot cake’ for public consumption. The saleable spectacle of breaking news is carried out in charged environment giving a feel of cut-throat competition. Standing at the site of the carnage, I waited not just to help my journalist friends, but I also watched other reporters thronging the scene, looking for exploring new dimension, a breaking news, to add to the developing story. Caught in the commercial trap of this ratting game, however, local reporters, working at such tragic sites, usually remain inattentive to their own security.

Covering breaking news minute-by-minute is what local reporters actually do. Relaying every bit of information to their respective media channels outside the conflict zone had become a ritual for these local journalists, a routine practice devoid of reflection. In other words, breaking news have become the new normal turning risky work into a *fait accompli*, a macabre necessity and a violence to which the local journalists contributed and paid the price for.

Out of the total 40 Pashtun journalists killed in the war since 2001, many have lost their lives in a wave of violence the region had never seen before: two-suicide attacks on average each day for three consecutive years from 2008 to 2010 (SATP 2018). Inviting global attention, this carnage confronted the reporters with risky conditions, raising the need for an alternative conceptual model in which human interests are given primacy over cold market calculations i.e., ratings and a commercial aspiration to be first with the news.

### **Reflective Journalism: A Liberative Concept?**

In a previous paper, we offered a theoretical argument emphasizing the importance of local journalists’ reflectivity, the outcome of experience evolving around rationalizing human relations by reviewing presuppositions. I have made it clear that reflective journalism do not plead here ‘activism’, and ‘advocacy’ because these variants of journalism are clearly inclined towards political ends. But reflective journalism connects a reporter directly with aggrieved party (read people here) through the medium of embodied experience, a prospective shared asset in the case of Pashtun reporters. In this kind of reporting, a local journalists sense of attachment could possibly be inspired by his/her cultural and social sense of ownership, an embodied experience that invites constant reflection in spare moments.

One of phenomenology’s founding fathers, Schutz, believed that experience becomes meaningful only when attention is reflected towards the

self (Lindlof and Taylor 2017; Natanson 1970).<sup>18</sup> If reporting could be considered a continuous process, which Natanson (1968, p. 222) called *an act*, the occupational experience of a journalist could be called a finished project which Natanson called *an action*. “The meaning of an action can thus be grasped only through reflection concerning its actual or projected completion”(Lindlof and Taylor 2017). This line of argument is informed by my own experience the phenomenological essence of which I shared in the method section. Using local experience as an asset, a journalist's reflectivity could be invoked and made productive by sensitizing local journalists to respond to their violence-hit surroundings. This shift could transform reporting by encouraging journalists to stay inside the event; put their spirit in the process of writing/observing; and learn from journalism by making their own experiences the center of their reflective self. With respect to reflexive movement of 1970s, sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1970) argues, “A systematic and dogged insistence upon seeing ourselves as we see others would transform not only our view of ourselves but also our view of others”.<sup>19</sup> This understanding can help avoid both the compulsions and complications of *neutral* and *detached* reporting, which, I found, Pashtun journalists face in their efforts to follow *objectivity*.<sup>20</sup>

Objectivity objectifies a local reporter's relationship to the site of occurrence. I offered a couple of exemplars to show the way market rationality promotes conformity to the ruling structure of power. The grossly inaccurate news of 200 brainwashed children showed how self-reflection was a casualty of the objective structure of journalism in which lack of probing into sources, the rush to be first with news and unconditional dependence on military evidence led to a creation of dramatic news production. Glimpses of this one-sided reporting is identified the world over wherein commercial media marginalize those ethnicities and races which are struggling on the receiving end of ruling power. In late 1970s, for instance, commercial media in England was held responsible for creating a moral panic by identifying an alleged plot in which a black political group was shown taking over seven major cities in Manchester. It was a case of

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<sup>18</sup> Lindlof, Thomas R, and Bryan C Taylor. *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*: Sage publications, 2017

<sup>19</sup> Lindlof, Thomas R, and Bryan C Taylor. *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*: Sage publications, 2017

<sup>20</sup> The idea of reflexive journalism originally came from the 1970s reflexive movement, which suggested practical alternative to theoretical sociological problems in the form of reflexive sociology. Gouldner (1970) argued “the historical mission of a Reflexive Sociology would be to transform the sociologist, to penetrate deeply into his daily life and work, enriching them with new sensitivities, and to raise the sociologist's self-awareness to a new historical level” (as cited in Lemert, 1993, p. 466).

dramatic reporting the shoddy nature of which was revealed later as a propaganda stunt by a few workers associated with right-wing organizations (Kushnick 1970).<sup>21</sup> Despite subsequent revelation, the press stuck to the original story. Why? It might be because the original idea of a 'Black Power Election Plot' was profitable enough that revealing the truth would have ended the suspense or public interests; or perhaps the original idea suited perceived public attitudes about Black Power well enough that the press simply ignored the evidence (Braham 1982).<sup>22</sup> In the political economy of commercial reporting, objectivity reduces a journalist to become a cog in the machine of media production, valorizing detachment and neutrality and undermining the significance of experience and affinity, which, otherwise, could be availed as resources in humanizing information.

In the case of Pashtun journalists, objectification was inherent partly in those news values which determine the Western journalism core and defines a story's worth. Violence and discrimination is given primacy over peace and harmony and the dramatized coverage of volatile issues is carried out from power and capital's perspective. What we cannot ignore here is the commercial organizational interests' role in shaping representation, limiting a reporter's experience while subjecting his work to presuppositions: the objective forces of capital promoting breaking news culture. Looking for a certain kind of actuality desensitizes a reporter to the surroundings, while limiting the possibility of his/her reflection on action. Professional obligations become a reporter's refuge not to think about what is not salable. Thanks to lack of independent access to a conflict zone, excessive demand for conflict-related news increased local reporters' chances to work as fixers and freelancers, a secondary position from where local reporters cannot effectively enforce their will to influence organizational decision making. These subordinate roles neither empower them to raise critical questions nor afford them an opportunity to access credible sources for verifying news. Such compulsions turn a local reporter into a rally point, an on-the-ground embodied resource which is hired by national and global media to provide them data and quotes mainly. From this perspective, it is not just the theoretical/conceptual domain of *objectivity*, inherent in professional values and technical rationality, which are at the core of a local reporter's training, that could be held responsible for limiting the understanding of news in local journalism. On-site experience, which was identified in this paper and was found overwhelmed by the insensitive

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<sup>21</sup> Kushnick, Louis. "Black Power and the Media." *Race Today* 2, 1970: 439-42

<sup>22</sup> Braham, Peter. "How the Media Report Race." In *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by T. Bennett M. Gurevitch, J. Curran and J. Woollacott, Menthuen.,: Routledge, 2005: 274-293

culture of dangerous working conditions, also needs a focus. This critical understanding would bracket field experience as a potential source to understand these blind spots, a valuable asset for practical realization to identify threats to oneself and to that of community as a whole.

One way of dealing with this challenge is to avoid training local journalists in neutrality and detachment so that these reporters could expand the horizon of their experience to reflect on their community and think upon their professional role on everyday basis. In journalism schools, in other words, reporters must be conceptually trained and occupationally socialized keeping in view their local requirements, which would help them valorize their relationship with own community and also value their occupational experience as the focus of their attention. In the Pashtun Belt, for example, I have found local reporters considering their work limited to objectively write a story based on a narrative style of 5Ws (Who, What, When, Where, Why) and 1H (How). Fulfilling these requirements relieve them of thinking beyond to critically look into the power politics involved in the making or distorting of conflict-related news. The challenge is not just limited to insecurity or threats from military and militants. But the issue, I argue, is their own contentment and conformity which stops them from thinking out of the box. This lack has reduced local journalism to an ahistorical culture of reporting in which events are reported more often out of context. Obfuscation of power politics is dominant theme in this kind of journalism a glimpse of which I have tried to show in this paper with reference to the military press conference in Swat. Reflective journalism, I suggest, is a possible answer to the crisis of reporting in a conflict zone and the absence of which would contribute to militarization, thanks to objectivity's focus on valorizing parties looking at conflict and violence through objectified and detached commercial lens.

## **Conclusion**

The 9/11 attacks in the United States did not change the world only, they also challenged utility of pre-war literature on journalism. Thus, identifying those factors which shape news in conflict scenario requires multi-disciplinary approach, the opposite of medium centric approaches rooted in media professionalism, i.e., *objectivity*. That is why journalists are discouraged to articulate choices and priorities to project human interest stories. Instead, they are generally bound to define news in accordance with market-oriented presuppositions/values. In many cases, journalism is not about reporting a truthful evidence. Reporting, instead, has to fulfill a technical and commercial criteria a glimpse of which was shown in this paper.

In conflict scenario, where foreign reporters are barred from accessing a conflict zone, a local reporter emerges as credible information source sharing spatial and temporal affinities with a local community. But how to turn his/her experience into an occupational asset depends upon local journalism's recognition in the so-called professional field of global media/journalism. The professional realization of a local reporter's field experience would also encourage reflectivity to be used as a method to improve the standard of local journalism. This realization has never been so strong as it has got now because of growing corporate media influence the world over. Rodney Benson (2004) stressed the need for reinvention of media sociology so as to connect organizational routines to larger structures such as the 'field', the working world of professional journalists. Benson (2004) notes that "the dominant models are either too micro-oriented or too macro-oriented; in both cases, they are leading researchers to look in the wrong places for explanations" (p. 311). Benson's (2004) observation is significant for conflict sensitive reporting where the bulk of researchers ignore the material conditions under which news production is carried out, a gap which this paper aimed to identify sharing my personal field experience, adopting a phenomenological approach.

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