

# Precarity, Technology, Identity: The sociology of conflict reporting in South Sudan

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## **Abstract**

*Material structures such as money, transport networks and technologies of safety are important constraints on the work of journalists, but a reasonably sophisticated understanding of how the practice of conflict reporting is structured by its material conditions requires us to go beyond rehashing existing knowledge of how little money, safety training and diplomatic support the modern journalist has. This chapter begins by outlining a critique of various strands of the commonly-accepted story of reporting conflicts, including its problematic optimism towards technology, and the limitations of the ideal-typical conflict journalist in both the popular and academic imaginations.*

*“I’d say there are two factors now. One is safety, and the other is money. Because news outlets are less and less happy about supplying either of those things. And they usually come hand in hand, because the more dangerous the situation is, the more expensive it is to operate. So you hear a lot of ‘oh we love [X], we love the story, we’re really interested, like, we’d love to see material when it’s finished.’”*

### **Interview respondent, Nairobi**

Changes in foreign reporting are, by and large, also changes in conflict reporting, given that the reporting of distant suffering is, as the term suggests, generally undertaken in geopolitically marginal<sup>1</sup> locations as a subset of foreign news more broadly. Two particular shifts over the last few decades have had far-reaching implications for the work of reporting on conflict: the move from permanent foreign correspondents towards flexible economies of stringers and freelancers, and a transformation in technology that has in some ways enabled remote newsgathering to be more easily practiced than ever before.

In the first instance, challenges to the economics of journalism and the comparatively high costs associated with foreign correspondents have led many newsrooms to gradually shift from maintaining overseas *bureaux*, towards flexible commissioning of stories from freelancers and stringers in different parts of the world (Hoffman 2003). Though there are variations within this general trend - Al Jazeera, for example, has continued to invest significantly in foreign correspondents (Figenschou 2010) - the overall shift has come to create at least two relevant effects. On the one hand, newsrooms’ increasing use of local stringers may be producing new challenges to traditional orthodoxies around how stories are told, as local-national stringers and freelancers occupy more space in *bureaux* (Bunce 2010). On the other, there is evidence that outside African foreign *bureaux* such as Nairobi and Johannesburg, connections between local-national journalists reporting on the continent and their wires and commissioning organizations may be stretched to the point that some local-national reporters spend so little time in physical newsrooms that assumptions about strong conditioning effects of ‘newsroom culture’ on journalists’ practices can reasonably be drawn into question (Bunce 2011).

There is scant data on the funding models presently underlying conflict journalism, though research does exist on the current landscape of funding for humanitarian journalism (of which the journalism of conflict might reasonably be

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considered a subset). Scott, Wright & Bunce (2018) have observed that sustained funding of humanitarian journalism is largely now the province of state-funded or assisted news agencies (such as AFP, Xinhua and Al Jazeera) and grant-funded endeavors ranging from the Bill and Melinda Gates' Foundation's subsidies to the resources of the Thompson Reuters Foundation. The increasing practice of journalists taking on additional work for NGOs to make ends meet is an ongoing area of research for the questions that it raises about how those involved in this work navigate between journalistic norms and the norms of the NGOs for whom freelancers may be contracted to shoot and potentially sell-on material for (Wright 2016). Moonlighting or multitasking (depending on your perspective) has become an indispensable part of making ends meet, as a South Sudan-based journalist described the situation:

*“I mean I couldn't survive fully with only [wire organization] work and also with some media outlets on request. It's impossible. South Sudan is, it's totally, it's too expensive. And then the good thing also in South Sudan is that there are so many humanitarian agencies and NGOs, UN agencies that need, need work, not only from visual, say photo and visual, which is my area, but also for, for audio, I mean text journalists who are able to do consultancies for these organizations. It's a good, it's a pretty good source to, to, to, to survive in South Sudan. otherwise it's impossible, it's so expensive that, there, there is no way to work as a pure journalist there”*

At the same time as a shift away from full-time correspondents to more precarious forms of freelancing is occurring, advances in technology are increasingly enabling reporting to be done from more and more remote regions. Cooper et al (2014) have argued that these shifts have included increases in the scale, speed, surveillance and saturation of reporting, as well as the creation of more sophisticated forms of mediated social relations between parties affected or involved in humanitarian emergencies and new possibilities of seeing disasters unfold live in remote places. Audiences across the world witnessing the 9/11 attacks live (Chouliaraki 2004) is perhaps the most widely recognizable example of the kind of mediation of distant suffering that is now possible thanks to satellites and increasingly lower transmission costs. Advances in satellite internet such as BGAN modems and compact satellite telephones (Livingston and Belle 2005) and the increasing availability of mobile internet access - often even in conflict zones (Hamilton, Jenner, and Maxwell 2004) have been used as evidence that filing stories from remote locations is becoming increasingly practical. These shifts, the argument implies, have compensated to some degree for a broader industry transition to stringer/freelancer journalism, allowing cheaper news production from distant parts of the world as a response to shrinking budgets for

permanent foreign correspondents.

On the one hand, these shifts can be read as democratizing access to the tools of media production and - at least in principle - the ability to reach audiences directly from the field. On the other, the danger and expense of reporting from conflict zones - which has, if anything, increased - may exacerbate dependencies between journalists and organizations able to subsidize these costs of access and safety (Cottle and Nolan 2007; Kalscsics 2011). It is not often recognized that for all the innovations in recording and transmission technology, journalists (whether 'citizen' or professional) still generally need to physically reach and return from zones of conflict in order to do their reporting. While augmented in their capacity to capture and broadcast testimony from dangerous places, journalists' bodies are fundamentally no more protected than they ever were, and are increasingly likely to be targeted for death or capture by states, armed actors and other bad actors.

## **Critiquing the straightforward account**

Although the story emerging from the work on humanitarian reporting and foreign correspondent studies over the last decade or so does paint a picture of financial pressure increasing the precarity of journalists working on humanitarian and conflict stories, we should be cautious of this account in a number of respects. In the first instance, any argument implying that technologies such as satellite phones (Livingston and Belle 2005) or smartphones in the hands of citizen journalists are able to offset the effects of a lack of funding for reporting ought to be treated with suspicion.

Further, when discussing the history of humanitarian and conflict journalism, there is a tendency for previous work in this field to focus on the experiences and histories of journalists from Europe and the US working abroad (Nothias 2015; Bentley 2013; Hamilton, Jenner, and Maxwell 2004; McLaughlin 2016; Rodgers 2016), though exceptions do exist (Bunce 2011). This observation should prompt a critical reflection on who we think of when we think of conflict journalism, and more especially who is not being thought of. It should also prompt a more thorough reflection on the degree to which the study of a journalism of conflict and humanitarian emergencies is deserving of the postcolonial critique of having examined the experience of European/American journalists abroad, and taken this to be a universal category to the exclusion of attending to experiences of journalists and journalism as practiced in the rest of the world.

## **The case against technological optimism**

*"So sitting in Nairobi, I remember like, Camille [Lepage] would, like, go off on fucking convoy with the SPLA across Jonglei... I remember saying, like, you know, they are amazing photographs,*

*but how the fuck did she get there? Has she got a flak jacket, has she got a helmet? Has she got a satphone? And they were like, ah we don't know. And like, you can't just commission people to do this. And they were like, ah, we didn't really commission her. She said she was going, and then she came back with these photographs and she's fine now, so it's not a problem."*

### **Interview, Nairobi**

Taken together, the changes in technology and the economics of journalism reflected on earlier can be naïvely read as a shift towards depending on freelance/stringer journalists at the same time as they are being given expanded abilities to do the work of reporting distant suffering more competently. But a picture this straightforward should be treated with suspicion. In the first instance, there is no reason to believe that innovation in satellite recording, smartphones, and other forms of democratized recording devices will do much to compensate for what is taken away from journalists' security and well-being through the shrinking of newsrooms, a scarcity of safety training, support, and equipment, and a general shift to conditions of precarity for journalists (Sambrook 2010) - both economic and increasingly, violently literal. Livingston and Belle's (2005) observation that satellite phones reduce the effects of remoteness on news reporting was, after all, made in a time before the devices began being tracked and their owners detained or killed, as appears to have been the case of the murder of Marie Colvin in Syria.

There may well be reasons to see these technologies as in fact being complementary to the logic of journalistic precarity - enabling a shift from access to institutional equipment and support to a more neoliberal form of entrepreneurship, where freelancers must increasingly find their own recording and safety gear, pay for transmission of images and copy, and generally assume more and more of the financial, technical and personal risks of the job. If you succeed in capturing the story, the network may buy it. If you are imprisoned or killed, you are on your own. Such cynical divisions of responsibility are not universal - though certainly more widespread than ought to make media professionals comfortable, but the shifting of costs and risks from news organizations to journalists raises ethical questions about whether this new economics of crisis and conflict reporting is not perhaps leading to terrible choices between incentivizing under-funded, under-trained, under-supported journalists to cover stories in dangerous places or refusing in practice to take stories from those places. Neither is an attractive option.

The argument for increasingly widespread access to technology also masks important complexities in what exactly 'widespread' means and how straightforward it is to obtain and use various technologies that might augment

reporting from dangerous contexts. Body armor is an instructive case in point. Otherwise known as a 'plate carrier', consisting of a dense nylon vest containing ceramic plates backed by kevlar in front and behind the wearer it is a potentially life-saving item when working in or near places where there is a high risk of injury from shrapnel or shooting. But obtaining and using one makes clear some of the difficulties with conflating an argument that specialized equipment is easier to obtain than decades ago with the argument that such equipment is easy to obtain.

The jacket itself can be purchased from eBay as a military surplus item fairly inexpensively, but the plates themselves must generally be purchased new, as second-hand plates are not generally available for sale, and may not be usable if they are. They will cost around £600, with each plate weighing between 2.8 and 4kg, making the total weight of a protective vest (without helmet) between approximately six and eleven kilograms. Plates may occasionally be obtained from one's commissioning news organization - Reuters, for example, provides these to its correspondents in South Sudan - as long as one is on a large enough commission for them or employed on a long-term basis. For freelancers, some not for profit organizations may provide body armor on a short-term rental basis, but generally against a hefty deposit of around £1,000.

This example illustrates a few of the reasons to be cautious of a narrative that the increased availability of various technologies might compensate for the overall degradation in the safety and security of journalists working in conflict zones. In the first instance, many of the technologies most suited to enhancing the ability to report from conflict regions are highly specialized - and therefore expensive. Like body armor, obtaining a satellite phone requires significant financial resources. Second, simply possessing it may also produce new security risks. As with satellite phones, being caught with body armor in your luggage may entail detention or worse. Finally, using such specialized technologies in the field immediately marks one out in ways that may not in fact contribute to safer, more effective reporting. Wearing it changes the relationship with non-combatants that one might want to interview - implying a high degree of danger directly to civilian interviewees who likely have no such protection themselves. How one is read by potentially hostile forces in the military and security institutions of a country is also sharply altered. Like the quick-application tourniquets, clotting-powders and trasuma bandages in a reasonably-stocked first aid kit, the technology of ballistic protection is one with an obvious military history, making a decision to use it a decision to invite potentially harmful readings of who you appear to be. Less textually, a journalist in body armor, carrying a satphone and a first aid kit full of items used to treat severe trauma invites suspicion and the potential for misidentification by authorities.

The problem of being misidentified as suspicious and placed in danger is not only

one for those possessing items as sophisticated as satellite phones and body armour. Even being caught with something as prosaic as a smartphone can be sufficient to attract potentially dangerous attention. Many South Sudanese journalists who had been working for a year or more had several stories of arrest and detention or near-detention by security personnel. As one reporter reflected:

*Like I remember in, the July crisis, in 2016, there [were] women running with a whole lot of their property on their head and I was just watching them, [and] I felt like I needed to take a picture of those people. So I brought out my smartphone and took a picture. But the flash was on. Someone saw me. I didn't see him, but he saw me, and he just came, he came to me and said, you give me that phone. So I didn't resist, I gave him the phone. So then he told me you come with me, and I said (laughs) I'm not going with you... I knew if it had just been me and him alone, it would have been a lot worse at that time*

This last point is also part of a more subtle observation generally - that the various technologies available to enhance reporting of violence and its consequences in many instances have specific etiquettes and skills that journalists must come to learn if they are to make use of them effectively. Having body armor is one problem, solvable through spending money or having the right kind of social capital required to obtain it through special loan arrangements. Knowing when it is acceptable to wear it (or to use a large DSLR camera, a sat-phone, or even the photographic function on a smartphone) requires developing a certain sense of the social rules and risks relating to various technologies in particular contexts. The fact that one can beg, buy or borrow equipment that can assist in reporting from dangerous spaces is not enough. What is sociologically relevant to the study of practices of journalism in risky context - beyond asking what structures who can beg, buy or borrow the equipment - is how these technologies in turn enable or constrain the kinds of practices that can be carried out. They may affect where one can travel safely, but also how one is 'read' on arrival, and whether the user is made safer or made into a target. Livingston and Belle's (2005) satellite phone may help diminish the effects of remoteness on reporting. It may also get you killed.

### **Whose conflict reporting?**

Beyond questioning whether technology is, in fact, compensating for increases in other constraints on journalists, one would do well to take a postcolonial pause to consider what kind of journalist we imagine when we imagine a conflict journalist. Despite an admirable recounting of the history of the war correspondent and the

rise of military embedding as a form of control, McLaughlin's (2016) war reporters (as one example of this lacuna) are generally white, Euro-American (or South African) journalists who fit well with a specific conception of what a war correspondent ought to look like. A genealogy of the generally white, once-but-no-longer-male foreign war reporter stretches from William Howard Russell's 'luckless tribe' (Best 2012) to the exploits of South Africa's 'Bang Bang Club' during the dying days of apartheid (Marinovich and Silva 2001). Generally absent from the orthodox discourse of the conflict reporter are all those from outside this European/American cultural universe. Having made this observation, the story of the history of conflict journalism begins to resemble a western universalism of the form robustly critiqued by postcolonial theorists for many decades now (Mignolo 2011).

Recognizing the invisibility of local-national reporters to the history of conflict journalism is more than simply critique for critique's sake. It raises questions of what we can say we know about conflict reporting, when what we know about conflict reporting is so narrowly focused on certain kinds of journalists. Moreover, there is good reason to suspect that the practices of and risks faced by local-national journalists may not be the same as the foreign correspondent archetype might suggest.

During my own research in South Sudan, the government was repeatedly cited by journalists as one of the primary threats to their lives and work through the actions of its National Security Service and its Media Authority. The two organisations' roles in censoring and intimidating journalists could fill a chapter on its own, but one of the primary differences in the levels of everyday risk perceived by journalists centered on the limits of what the state could plausibly do to journalists who were South Sudanese citizens in comparison to journalists from other, more protected nations.

In line with resisting a 'Western' center to who we consider when we consider conflict journalists, we ought also to draw into question who we think our conflict journalist has in mind as their audience when reporting, and what they understand their normative roles to be. A journalism that sees its role as reaching audiences and decision-makers who can materially affect the course of events in 'other places' (as one possible conception) doesn't necessarily mean a journalism whose stories are directed at Washington, New York, London. News from South Sudan that reaches Kampala or Nairobi, news from Somalia that reaches Addis Ababa, and news from Lesotho that reaches Pretoria (to name three examples) may all be more likely to produce a political response than the news that makes it to capitals in the global north. Normative ideas of journalism as provoking intervention and assistance may look very different for journalists when we leave the image of the 'Western' foreign correspondent writing home behind.



## Practicing conflict journalism in ‘Aidland’

Contrary, perhaps, to expectations, a freelancer arriving in Juba, South Sudan, would very quickly notice that conflict zones can, in fact, be highly structured social and physical spaces. Just as there is a yawning gap between the \$1,500-a-month, airconditioned apartments near the local UN base and \$20-a-night dives shared with rats, so the lifeworlds of those engaged in reporting on, ending, fighting, funding or managing the conflict are often highly structured. Rephrased perhaps less colourfully, there is a sociological reality to the world of marginal conflicts that must be borne in mind when studying the practices of journalists working in such contexts.

The past decade has seen the development of a literature in conflict studies and humanitarianism that examines the effects of the social structure of the international humanitarian and peacekeeping world on the micro-level practices of peacekeeping and humanitarian work (Schwartz et al. 2010; Autesserre 2012; Autesserre 2014a; Roth 2015). Yet a similar project and its attendant theorising has yet to fully emerge in media and journalism studies concerning the freelancers, stringers, and other journalists who circulate in what is (perhaps self-indulgently) referred to as ‘Aidland’ (Mosse 2011) (see Harrison (2013) for a critique of the term) or, in the sociology of peacebuilding work, ‘Peaceland’ (Autesserre 2014b; Heathershaw 2016; Jennings 2016).

Some of the most prominent features of the sociology of these spaces are the discourses of securitization and ‘risk management’ that suffuse them (Duffield 2010), and the practices of social separation and ‘bunkerization’ connected to them (Autesserre 2014b; Roth 2015; Dandoy 2015). In examining the micro-sociology of staff working for peacebuilding organizations in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Autesserre (2014a) has observed how discourses of ‘risk minimization’, often enforced through bureaucratic processes, affect living and working arrangements in conflict spaces. Relations with communities may become so highly securitized as to undermine attempts to establish the kind of productive relationships required to perform peacebuilding work. In the case of the UN peacekeeping presence in Liberia, Jennings (2016) has argued that minimization and securitization as a formalization of relations with local communities is in fact an outlier for an international presence that is in fact largely designed to bypass or exclude the local as far as possible, in favor of what she refers to as a ‘peacekeeping bubble’.

I would argue that the social geography of conflict space can be productively thought as colonial - not least because its spatial and social patterns often occur in and resemble the context of former colonial geographies. It is constructed as a binary between a cosmopolitan interior and an outside that carries further

associated value binaries of comfort/hardship, safety/danger (Autesserre, 2014a), knowledge/object-of-knowledge (Duffield 2010) and so on. Questions of the applicability of 'international' legal and ethical norms to 'traditional' settings (Arensen 2016) betray a citizen/subject distinction with distinctly colonial - and implicitly racial - roots (Mamdani 1996). It is appropriate, therefore, to think of the social geography of conflict space as being Manichean in a sense resembling that proposed by Fanon (1963), including a suspicion that racial and colonial discourses may contribute to the production of what it means to be inside (and outside) in the geography of Peaceland.

Returning then, to our focus on the work of journalists, the concept of a Manichean social geography provides an entry point to theorizing influences on journalists' work in a manner that is both critical and postcolonial. As a discourse containing a tension between objectivity and ethics, it seems reasonable to ask how journalist identities of being inside/outside Peaceland (or perhaps in some liminal position) might produce different forms of journalistic practice. For example the differential distribution of resources between Peaceland's cosmopolitan interior and its outside can be expected to combine with the journalist's own access to spaces - conditioned, in part by their personal and professional identity - to structure different proximities to suffering and positions of speaking from which they may report on it.

One consequence of a Manichean geography of safety/danger, is that 'safety' becomes both a resource needed to do journalism in spaces like South Sudan (to a greater degree than elsewhere) and a force that structures how practices of journalism may proceed and what it means when they do. Duffield (2010, p2) observes that the humanitarian space of South Sudan resembles a kind of 'archipelago of international space' connected by highly securitized land or (more generally) air transport links, connections between nodes that journalists are not equally free to traverse. Who may travel in relative speed and safety, or often at all, is in part connected to whether journalists have access to various kinds of capitals. UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) offer safe travel to most major hubs outside the capital at a cost of \$550 return, while the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) offers free flights on UN planes, but selectively, according to the perceived utility of transporting and potentially having to accommodate the prospective traveler (generally at their own expense) on the other side. Travelling overland is largely impossible in the country's rainy season, and considered highly unsafe in the dry season - a pattern mirrored in other contexts - most notably the Democratic republic of Congo.

This 'infrastructure of safety' has structuring effects. It creates a market for the supply of safe travel which constrains the movement of journalists through the geography of South Sudan according to - at least in part - the aims and objectives

of the institutions who control it. In South Sudan, this is primarily UNMISS, various UN agencies, and major NGOs such as the ICRC and MSF who either have shared access to UNHAS (United Nations Humanitarian Air Service) that they can grant to journalists, or aircraft of their own. But other actors inflect the functioning of this structure too. South Sudan's infamous National Security Service (NSS) screens all passengers leaving the airport in the capital, occasionally removing 'troublesome' journalists or other individuals from flights. Private airlines do exist, but do not offer the same levels of overall safety as the infrastructure of the major actors in Aidland - offering no safe compounds and airport-to-base escorts on the arrival end, for example.

Moreover, this infrastructure serves to normalize a perception of an inside/outside, safety/danger binary within which journalists' safest location is 'naturally' inside the compound, the UN base, the 'journalist hotel', safe from the outside. Put differently, the securitization of space that characterizes Aidland serves to naturalize the idea of a humanitarian 'inside' as safe, and all that is outside as (potentially) not.

## **Journalistic identity**

*"... a [dangerous] situation that like a white person is never gonna find themselves in.... so I feel pretty immune from these, sort of, localized, often ethnicized conflicts. And I feel that both sides would rather talk to me than do me any harm, on the whole."*

### **British journalist, Nairobi**

It is insufficient to attempt to theorize journalists' ability to navigate the social geography of Peaceland or the changing structure of foreign reporting without considering professional and personal identities. Limited existing work on the identities of stringers and freelancers operating in conflict spaces suggests the utility of investigating aspects of gender as enabling or limiting constraints to doing the work of bearing witness. From the limited accounts presently available in the study of journalism in other contexts, there is good reason to believe that gender will have an effect on the way in which any practice of journalism will unfold in a conflict setting (Playdon 2002). Van Zoonen (1998) has also pointed out that gender may well affect practices of conflict reporting, given the highly masculine conceptions of the space that often circulate in both popular culture and the in-the-field sociology of journalism. While gender and journalism practice is a productive area of research in general (see, for example Allan, Bradley and

Branston (1998)), much less work has been done on the role of gender in conflict reporting specifically.

There is also reason to believe that journalists' status as foreign or local-national has a significant effect on their freedom to shape the nature of their coverage. Bunce (2010) has argued that local journalists may have an expanded ability to challenge foreign stereotypes - particularly in reporting on violence - but that this power still operates in tension with the norms of the *bureaux* for which they file. In examining the work of correspondents filing from Sudan on the conflict in Darfur (Bunce, 2011), she finds evidence that being local-national to a conflict may mean that journalists are subject to concerns over retribution by conflict actors that foreign journalists are largely exempt from. Given the shift towards depending on local-national journalists outlined earlier, better understanding the effects of local-national identity on journalistic practice remains a valuable area of enquiry.

Finally, I believe that race may also be a useful conceptual approach to studying the influence of journalists' identities on their practice. Work on the influence of race on the construction of narratives of distant suffering is readily found - Banivanua-Mar (2008) and Clark (2009) are a small example of a large literature studying Conradian 'Heart of Darkness' imaginings of the violence of racial others. Work on how race structures practices of journalism and the identities of journalists has been undertaken (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013), but studies on the dynamics of race in remote (for the particular 'center' assumed in this paradigm) places is far less common. Examining the dynamics of race as an element of journalistic practice seems a reasonable proposition, given the colonial nature of the social world in which conflict journalists are assumed to circulate. It is a component of a journalist's identity on which the structuring forces of a Manichaean humanitarian social space may operate with particular strength, allowing safe passage for some, in certain instances, and creating danger and hazard for others.

There is of course much more that could be said on any of the aspects of a sociology of conflict journalism that I've so far outlined here. How these elements combine in structuring the practices of journalists in, say, Juba, will differ whether one is talking about a press conference at an NGO, reporting from a protection of civilians site within a major UN base, or covering exceptional moments of violence. Further, what elements are relevant in explaining the practices of South Sudanese journalists may be reshuffled again when thinking through the work of colleagues in other conflicts. What ought to be clear, however, is something of the broadness of the field that has yet to be properly investigated.

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