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2025

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## Interpreting and War Journalism: Collecting Memories of Fixers in Ukraine

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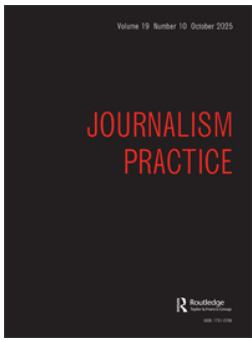
Ruiz Rosendo, Lucia; Ponomarenko, Lesia

### How to cite

RUIZ ROSENDO, Lucia, PONOMARENKO, Lesia. Interpreting and War Journalism: Collecting Memories of Fixers in Ukraine. In: Journalism practice, 2025, p. 20. doi: 10.1080/17512786.2025.2565665

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:188107>

Publication DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2025.2565665](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2565665)



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**To cite this article:** Lucía Ruiz Rosendo & Lesia Ponomarenko (05 Oct 2025): Interpreting and War Journalism: Collecting Memories of Fixers in Ukraine, Journalism Practice, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2025.2565665](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2565665)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2565665>



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Published online: 05 Oct 2025.



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# Interpreting and War Journalism: Collecting Memories of Fixers in Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

The role of interpreters in conflict zones has drawn increasing attention from researchers and the media. However, there remains a notable gap in studies exploring the functions of interpreters working alongside foreign war journalists, commonly referred to as “fixers”. Fixers are tasked with translating and interpreting, guiding journalists on the ground, facilitating contact with civilians and local authorities, and assessing risks. This paper aims to analyse their roles during the recent conflict in Ukraine. Drawing on published testimonies from and semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian fixers, the article seeks to understand their roles and challenges. Key findings reveal that, in addition to navigating significant security risks, fixers face dilemmas regarding identity and the expectation of neutrality. Frequently, personal affiliations and emotions conflict with situations they face, particularly when those issues directly affect their homeland or community. Their prior experiences and war narratives they navigate substantially influence their choices when translating specific concepts for journalists, underscoring the notion that language is rarely neutral. These findings invite reflection on the impact fixers may have on processes of news transmission.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 February 2025  
Accepted 18 September 2025

## KEYWORDS

Fixers; interpreters; Ukraine; communication; war reporting; war journalism

## Translation and War Reporting

Interest among Translation Studies scholars in transcultural journalism and multilingual media has developed intensively in recent years. Works published on news translation include Bielsa (2007, 2016), Bielsa and Bassnet (2009), Davier (2014, 2017), Davier and van Doorslaer (2018), Valdeón (2012, 2014, 2022), Schäffner (2012), and van Doorslaer (2010, 2012). These authors touch upon various aspects of translation in journalism, and the challenges of research into journalistic translation, such as the establishment of authorship, loss of source texts, and translators’ and interpreters’ (in)visibility. For instance, it is difficult to differentiate between a straightforward translation of a piece of journalism (said to be performed by a translator) and newswriting based on sources in a different language (said to be written by a journalist). Therefore, discussions still

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exist surrounding whether the transfer of information from one language into another should be referred to as “translation”, “transediting”, “tradaptation” or otherwise (Valdeón 2014). Bielsa and Bassnett (2009) and Davier (2014, 2017) prefer to talk about the “translation” of news, rather than “transediting”. According to Bielsa and Bassnett (2009), the composite terms seem artificial, and Davier (2017) suggests the word “translation” be used for the sake of simplicity. Van Doorslaer (2012) introduces the term “journalator”, which combines “journalist” and “translator”, to increase the visibility of translation in journalism. This term describes “an interventionist newsroom worker who makes abundant use of translation when transferring and reformulating or recreating informative journalistic texts” (Van Doorslaer 2012, 1046).

Transcultural journalism has also been approached from interdisciplinary Social Studies and Political Science perspectives. These studies include research into the domestication of international conflicts on Ukrainian television (Taradai 2012, 2014) and the coverage of the armed conflict in Ukraine by the world media (Nilsson 2021; Nygren et al. 2018; Roman, Wanta, and Buniak 2017; Toal and O’Loughlin 2018). In addition, Ponomarenko (2019), in her descriptive case study of news texts published by the official webpage of Euronews, explored the discursive construction of identities in multilingual media. Lately, interest among researchers in the processes of translation in conflicts, especially processes involving textual and contextual transformations during information transfer from one environment to another, has increased exponentially.

Information transfer in multilingual media is directly related to translation and, more broadly, to a group’s identity. Every country has its own journalistic traditions in terms of language and style. Translation of identity-related information is closely related to the domestication of news and discursive strategies in news production, and to the construction and representation of internal and external (perceived) identities (Charaudeau 2002). In the coverage of armed conflicts, word choice plays a crucial role in how readers perceive the events covered. For example, Riocreux (2016, 58) writes that the French media would use the expression “*faire tomber le régime de lanukovitch*” (“bring down the Yanukovych regime”) in relation to the “Ukrainian crisis”. Riocreux reveals that the same expression was used by the French press in relation to the Arab Spring, which could evoke the illusion of similarity between the processes and outcomes of the events. This suggestion is in line with Baker’s (2006) narrative theory, since the illusion of similarity would be built on the background knowledge of the target audience.

References to historical memories of armed conflicts in Ukraine are numerous, and the origins of modern wartime journalism are inextricably linked to Ukraine. Importantly, journalist William Howard Russell is often mentioned as one of the first modern war correspondents, having spent 22 months covering the Crimean war for *The Times* between 1854 and 1855 (Allan and Zelizer 2004). The armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, beginning with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and escalating with a full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, has been of interest to various researchers (D’Anieri 2019; Marples 2021; Menon and Rumer 2015; Stoner 2022). However, to our knowledge, no studies have been carried out on the role of interpreters in the collection and transfer of information in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Although demand for interpreters is high and their work has been discussed, it has not yet been approached from an academic perspective and remains invisible.

## Interpreters in War Reporting

The role of interpreters in war reporting is that of “an intermediary in the flow of information between events and the publication of news” (Palmer 2007, 14); we add that they are the *first* intermediaries. Unlike foreign journalists, interpreters are usually present before the outbreak of conflict and are often members of the local community. Traditionally, journalists need to witness the events and contact sources to cover the unfolding of the conflict. When they do not understand the language of their sources, they must recruit local interpreters. The sources have “an effect on what is covered and how it is covered” (Rantanen 2004, 302): “news is not what happens, but what someone says has happened and will happen” (Sigal 1986, 15). Hence, one could argue that interpreters have an impact on how sources’ accounts are translated and, therefore, on how they are told in the journalist’s language.

Usually, the role of interpreters includes many other duties (Palmer 2007), that is why they are often called “fixers”. As Stahuljak (2024) notes, the term “fixer”, originating from journalistic contexts, gained prominence during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (2001–2021) and saw broader usage with the onset of the full-scale armed conflict in Ukraine. In her book (2024, 9), she prefers the term “fixer” over “interpreter” and mentions that among journalists, fixers are known as the “unsung heroes of foreign reporting”. Fixers, also called “local producers” or even “local journalists”, help arrange travels, set up interviews, and translate for foreign correspondents lacking local language skills (L. Palmer, quoted in Liu 2022). They also play an editorial role, helping correspondents brainstorm ideas, suggesting different angles to pursue, and, sometimes, even doing a fair degree of reporting for a story. This means that fixers, who usually have no distance from the people and events they help report on, are essential for collecting information and in how the facts are told to the world. They face multiple challenges: Palmer (quoted in Liu 2022) argues that fixers in Ukraine face challenges like their counterparts in other conflicts, such as their vulnerability to being targeted by local authorities who disapprove of local citizens helping foreign correspondents.

Interpreters, when helping foreign correspondents gather information, and translators and/or journalists, when transferring that textual information, make decisions. Baker (2006, 105) touches upon sensitivity and conflict in connection with ethical choices they face “to reproduce existing ideologies as encoded in the narratives elaborated in the text or utterance, or to dissociate themselves from those ideologies”. Such situations, where interpreters must decide whether or not to comply with certain ideologies or omit certain terms, are not rare in the sphere of news media. Therefore, although fixers are often deemed essential due to their cultural understanding and familiarity with local issues, concerns have been raised regarding their influence on decision-making. There are also apprehensions about the potential bias introduced by fixers through mistranslation and their possible excessive impact on narratives of stories. Concerns are similarly raised regarding the threat they pose to the traditional correspondent model (Harris and Williams 2019). Post-9/11 wars have become synonymous with increased dangers faced by Western war correspondents, particularly from combatants, making covering conflict events “a very risky enterprise” (Williams 2020, 178). This has made it more difficult for correspondents to work in warzones, making them more dependent on freelance reporters, fixers, local journalists and non-journalists, interviews via online calls and

telephones, and corroboration of information appearing on social networks to facilitate access and coverage.

Whether on-site or remote, fixers collaborating with journalists, news agencies, or other organisations are frequently invisible yet essential contributors to wartime journalism. Nygren et al. (2018) conducted an extensive study on how the 2014 war in Ukraine was framed in mainstream media across four countries: Ukraine, Russia, Poland and Sweden. The study examined the tensions between professional detachment and journalistic activism, influenced by level of involvement in the conflict, without delving into the process of transferring information between languages during material creation, interviews, and other contexts. Nearly all journalists interviewed in Ukraine for the study expressed concerns about the ethical dilemmas they faced while reporting on the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Those dilemmas centred on the challenge of maintaining impartiality despite their feelings of belonging and patriotism towards their country. Although many local journalists recognised the expectation of impartiality, they confessed they struggled to remain neutral; some even asserted they saw themselves as both journalists and citizens, feeling a responsibility to promote the national interests of Ukraine. Fixers, often recruited locally, face comparable dilemmas.

### **War-time Fixers in Ukraine: Collecting Recent Memories**

Interviews with fixers offer insight into their experiences working in potentially hazardous environments. Supplementing this approach with readily-available testimonies offers further insight into their needs and challenges. Therefore, we carried out semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian fixers and analysed a corpus of published testimonies (see Annex 1). The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What is the role(s) of fixers in facilitating international coverage of the war in Ukraine?

This research question can be nuanced as follows:

- How do fixers perceive their professional identity, how do others perceive them, and what roles do their educational backgrounds, related professions, and tasks play in shaping their expertise?
- What are the working conditions for fixers? How do legal frameworks, security measures, recruitment processes, and market demand influence their professional dynamics, trust-building, and overall working environment?
- What are the emotional and psychological implications of working as a fixer?
- What ethical dilemmas do fixers encounter in their work, particularly in maintaining objectivity and managing sensitive information? How do they reconcile their ideologies with professional ethics and responsibilities?
- How do fixers mediate cultural and linguistic differences between local communities and international media, and what challenges do they face in translation processes, especially when dealing with wartime neologisms, terminology, or regional language variations? How are language processing technologies integrated into this process (if any)?
- To what extent are fixers recognised for their contributions to published materials?

In terms of the researchers' reflexivity (Berger 2015; Tracy 2010), the first author is a scholar and interpreter of Spanish nationality who resides in Switzerland. With many years of experience studying the role of interpreters in conflict zones, she possesses extensive knowledge of the dynamics present in interpreted-mediated conflict scenarios. Although she does not share the same language and culture as the fixers in the study, she has a similar professional background as an interpreter. This perspective is further enriched by the second author, a Ukrainian citizen from Kyiv currently living in Switzerland, whose predominant language is Ukrainian, though she is also proficient in Russian. Over the past decade, she has lived and worked both in Ukraine and abroad, enhancing her understanding of the information flow between local and international media. Her role as a language assistant with the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Sievierodonetsk, a city in eastern Ukraine, provided her with valuable insights into the role of fixers. These experiences deepened her understanding of the communication dynamics between international and local interlocutors in armed conflict contexts, fostered trust and empathy with the participants in this study, and enriched her understanding of the broader context for the corpus analysis.

## Methodology<sup>1</sup>

The corpus contained 20 articles and two transcripts from streamed radio interviews, totalling approximately 58,000 words. Material was identified through systematic keyword searches in Ukrainian media outlets, available in both Ukrainian and English. Filters ensured relevance based on date and source. The selection process aimed to capture a variety of perspectives on the profession, including fixers' roles in facilitating international coverage of the war in Ukraine and their contributions to journalistic storytelling.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in Ukrainian with six Ukrainian fixers (four women and two men). Participants were identified through word-of-mouth referrals and outreach via online professional networks. This interview format was selected for its flexibility and potential for in-depth responses. General questions provided a structured framework for discussion, while allowing respondents the freedom to address topics in their own manner. This alleviated pressure on participants, encouraging them to share their experiences comfortably. Key areas of inquiry included understanding how communication between journalists and fixers is organised; who is responsible for oral and written translation; challenges associated with working as a fixer; and the frequency of linguistic misunderstandings. Additionally, it examined the terminology used to refer to their work (e.g., as producers, co-authors, or fixers) and how far their contributions are acknowledged in published materials. Respondents were encouraged to share examples of their collaboration with foreign journalists, highlighting how these partnerships developed and how their contributions influenced the final outcomes. Special attention was given to sensitive topics such as safety, stress, and resilience. While general inquiries about these areas were included, they were intentionally limited to avoid triggering vulnerabilities or retraumatising the participants. Instead, these themes often emerged organically during discussions. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Throughout the research process, confidentiality and anonymity were upheld. Participants were identified as F1, F2, F3, F4, F5 and F6.

## Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, the initial step involved reading through them to grasp the participants' conveyed messages before deconstructing and recontextualising the content. To address subjective judgments, phenomenological reduction, or bracketing, was employed, ensuring reflexivity throughout the process. In the subsequent step, each account was meticulously analysed to identify statements that illustrated each participant's experience. Formulated meanings were extracted from these significant statements via a process of reflexive iteration, subsequently organised into categories and consolidated into higher-level themes. This approach was consistently applied to the testimonies as well. For the coding process, the software Atlas.ti was utilised, resulting in a total of 33 categories that were grouped into 7 higher-level themes, as illustrated in [Table 1](#) below (see [Table 1](#)).

Since "the over-riding objective of analysis is to produce an intelligible, coherent, and valid account" (Dey 1993, 52), the next step was to write a narrative based on the data as reorganised by category and theme. The aim was to use the thematic structure while staying faithful to the original statements and preserving the anonymity of the participants. The descriptive narrative provides a summary that reconstructs the participants' experiences, from both the testimonies and the interviews.

**Table 1.** Categories and themes identified during data analysis.

Professional identity and expertise	Profession title and professional identity Related professions Background and expertise Tasks Working languages Training aspects
Working conditions	Legal framework Security and safety Recruitment and first contact Gender dimension Market demand Professional dynamics, trust and cooperation Remuneration and compensation Time constraints and working under pressure Casualties
Emotional and psychological implications	Psychological challenges Positive emotions Negative emotions
Ethical implications	Objectivity and bias Professional ethics Personal sentiment, identity, ideology Gatekeeping and client screening Sensitivity of information
Language and cultural mediation	Cultural and historical context Fixer as a cultural mediator Translation and interpreting processes Terminology and wartime neologisms Wartime irony, sarcasm, jokes Use of technologies Local language considerations (Ukrainian, Russian, local colloquial parlance)
(In)visibility in published material	Visibility of fixers in the final material Co-authoring, content creation, and contribution
Comparative contexts	Fixers outside Ukraine

## Discussing the Role of Fixers in Ukraine

### *Professional Identity and Expertise*

The fixer profession in Ukraine has a relatively recent history and diverse interpretations, particularly after gaining prominence due to media attention following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the 2022 invasion. Initially recognised within a niche community of Ukrainian journalists and photojournalists collaborating with foreign media in conflict zones, the term has since expanded to include a wider array of professionals who support international media teams. Fixers are primarily associated with logistical support, problem-solving, and adaptability in high-pressure situations. As noted by Stukalo (2023a), "a fixer is a locally hired coordinator who helps organise the workflow of journalists, photographers, and TV crews during their foreign assignments." They are responsible for obtaining permits, arranging interviews, translating, and ensuring the smooth operation of local logistics for visiting media professionals. One fixer elaborated, "for me, the work of a fixer involves being both a translator and a driver" (Hordeyev 2022). The importance of local contacts is paramount to a fixer's role; one fixer remarked "I remember journalists jokingly saying that 'you are a guy who knows a guy'" (Bilousenko 2022).

Some seasoned journalists and local professionals in Ukraine express concerns about the term "fixer", often viewing it as reductive. The term can conjure stereotypes of a "technical employee" who facilitates logistical tasks without intellectual engagement in the journalistic process. One fixer remarked, "in the Western community's perception, a fixer is seen as a technical employee who is not considered part of the media team. To shift this perspective, we need to adopt a new concept and refer to them as producers instead of fixers" (Hrytsai 2023). These professionals therefore often prefer titles such as "producer", "local producer", or "field producer", which more accurately reflect their contributions to content creation and storytelling.

However, for some journalists, and fixers without extensive experience in journalism, the term "fixer" is often seen as pragmatic, straightforward, and non-controversial, meaning a clear and recognisable role in media support that encompasses essential duties like coordination, translation, and on-the-ground assistance. Some perceive the role as part of a broader definition of journalism, albeit lacking the full creative control associated with journalistic authorship. Thus, while some prefer an updated term that better reflects their contributions, others appreciate the pragmatic, well-established term "fixer."

The backgrounds and expertise of fixers in Ukraine are remarkably diverse, including those with journalistic experience and individuals from related or unrelated fields who have adapted their skills to support international journalists. Some fixers have strong journalism backgrounds, boasting significant local careers. One respondent spent ten years working as a journalist and producer, having received formal training at City University (F1). Another fixer, operating alongside international journalists in Donetsk, transitioned into the role from journalism, leveraging media skills and a deep understanding of the local context. As one fixer notes, "fixers with journalistic experience and a solid network of contacts are in high demand among foreign reporters" (Ivanenko 2014), highlighting that a journalist's familiarity with media workflows aligns seamlessly with the responsibilities of a fixer.

For some fixers, media experience does not solely encompass news writing or reporting; it can also include backgrounds as radio hosts or producers within the entertainment industry. Professions related to journalism often include fields such as public relations, communications, or freelance reporting. As one fixer pointed out, many of their colleagues in Donetsk were formerly students, small business owners, or managers who retrained to adapt to the demands of wartime journalism. For those lacking a traditional journalistic background, other skills have proven advantageous. Many possess essential organisational abilities and proficiency in foreign languages, enabling them to manage logistical tasks, drive vehicles, and facilitate communication between international journalists and local contacts. Some language professionals with backgrounds in interpreting and translation or degrees in linguistics are also recruited. Teachers like Oleksiy Otkydach and Kristina Bogdyazh, who taught Spanish and French respectively, applied their language skills to support international journalists: “Knowing languages means we can comment on everything that is happening here, tell foreigners, make posts, videos, and so on” (Stukalo 2023b).

The responsibilities of fixers are comprehensive and multifaceted. Their primary task is to assist foreign correspondents, who may be in the country for only a brief period, in finding essential interviews, experts, and locations pertinent to reporting on the conflict. This often includes managing logistical challenges such as securing transportation, assessing safe passage, and organising interviews with civilians and military personnel. Fixers also proactively safeguard sensitive information that could threaten military operations or overall safety. One fixer described successfully persuading a major media outlet to modify a report on defence operations, emphasising that certain details should not be disclosed in such depth (Stukalo 2023b). Fixers may also process the collected material and translate it into the language of publication. International media teams typically seek fixers with strong language skills and experience in journalism-related tasks. The priority is, of course, English and any available European language (Hordeyev 2022). “The more languages a fixer knows, the better. Of course, internationals feel more comfortable communicating with those who know their native language, such as French or Spanish” (Stukalo 2023b).

There is no formal training specific to the role of a fixer. While many fixers come from related fields, the skills required to work in a conflict zone—from negotiation and security awareness to cultural mediation and crisis management—are often learned on the job.

### ***Working Conditions***

Foreign journalists arriving in Ukraine typically seek a fixer in advance. Frequently, teams work with the same fixer across multiple visits or rely on recommendations to identify a suitable candidate. Fixer recruitment is often an informal process, largely driven by networks and word-of-mouth referrals, and the initial engagement can be precarious. As one respondent noted, initial contacts often occur through casual or hurried exchanges. Fixers are also commonly approached through personal networks or social media platforms: “The TV companies I worked with were recommended by my friends. They called me and explained exactly what I would have to do every day and tested my English skills” (Bilousenko 2022). There are fixers who began as volunteers then became professionals. Some fixers and volunteers found their clients by proactively offering their assistance:

Twitter is probably one of the main communication channels for foreign journalists. They idolize it, love it, and get a lot of insights from it. The conversion rate of Twitter messages was enormous, the highest I've ever seen in my life, when you send 100 messages, 80% of the responses are replies - it was cool. (Radio Skovoroda 2022)

Fixers are typically tasked with evaluating the security situation on the ground and determining whether it is safe to proceed to a specific location. They can generally decline assignments to areas they consider unsafe. Some note that their experience in a conflict zone has enhanced their ability to identify risks, making their assessments crucial for the team's safety.

It happens that from time to time, a fixer is required to look for information about safe routes for traveling in Ukraine and within the city. He/she may also be asked to probe a safe area to book a hotel and check the working status of the shelter (for example, the key to the shelter in a Kharkiv hotel was simply lost). (Hordeyev 2022)

Security and safety concerns heavily influence the working conditions of fixers, who frequently encounter life-threatening situations. They are responsible for their own safety and that of their team. One fixer recounted an experience in which a field producer and journalist had to make swift decisions to evade danger: "Enemies deliberately shoot at the press ... the inscription 'press' on the vest may not save us but rather provoke them" (Bilousenko 2022). Fixers, particularly those operating in regions like Donbas, are acutely aware of the rapidly changing security landscape. The inherent risks for fixers in conflict zones are stark, with many experiencing or witnessing violence firsthand. However, although some international media organisations provide basic safety equipment, such as helmets and bulletproof vests, many fixers navigate these perilous conditions without sufficient support. Casualties are a grim reality for them. The tragic death of Oleksandra Kuvshynova, a Ukrainian fixer killed during the Russian invasion, is a sobering reminder of the daily hazards faced by fixers (Semotiuk 2022).

While the situation has improved since 2014, formal legal protection for fixers remains inadequate. Unlike journalists, who typically benefit from international norms and employer-provided insurance, fixers often exist in a legal grey area due to the ambiguity surrounding their status. This largely hinges on their arrangements with clients. Large international media organisations tend to provide official contracts, insurance, and protective equipment, but that is not always the case for smaller international teams and freelance journalists.

Vlad Maslov also works unofficially, receiving money in cash or on a card. When asked about insurance, he says: "Do we have insurance in case of any unforeseen events? No, we don't. Our work is a complete 'contingency'."

Similarly, Yuriy Melnyk does not have insurance. He hasn't even thought about it, nor has he signed an official contract with the editorial staff. But, Melnyk notes, the Japanese publication is very concerned about the safety of both journalists and fixers: "Given the very strict security policy, we work very limited ... " (Lavryshyn, Semenyuta, and Skliarevska 2023)

Insurance for fixers is frequently limited and often arranged independently. Unlike staff journalists who benefit from coverage provided by foreign media outlets, freelance fixers typically have to secure their own insurance. For instance, "Yevgeny Semekhin, unlike most of his colleagues, insured himself with MetLife, the only company in

Ukraine that offers life insurance for those at the front” (Lavryshyn, Semenyuta, and Skliar-evska 2023). Moreover, some fixers express concerns about potential complications related to tax formalities when establishing foreign currency accounts as sole proprietors. The paperwork can be cumbersome, with fixers often spending up to two full days completing the documents for a few assignments (Lavryshyn, Semenyuta, and Skliar-evska 2023).

Demand for fixers surged in February 2022. However, some have observed a slight decline over time. This can be attributed to security restrictions preventing journalists from accessing unsafe zones and the cumbersome process of obtaining approvals. In 2022, Ukraine became the second deadliest country for journalists, with UNESCO reporting 11 confirmed journalist killings, while local organisations recorded as many as 43 deaths, including those of off-duty journalists (Oliinyk et al. 2022). In addition to the immediate risks to their safety, fixers face potential long-term implications. Abit Hoxha, a researcher specialising in conflict media coverage, highlights various dangers that fixers encounter in their work, including physical, financial, psychological, and digital threats. Without adequate measures for digital safety, fixers remain vulnerable even after completing their assignments (Hrytsai 2023). Given these challenges, international organisations and Ukrainian civil society have provided vital financial, technical, and psychological support to journalists in recent years. This includes initiatives such as digital security training and mental health resources (Oliinyk et al. 2022).

### ***Emotional and Psychological Implications***

The role of a fixer is fraught with emotional and psychological challenges. As said before, fixers often operate in perilous environments, which means that they have to manage high levels of stress and navigate emotionally charged circumstances, often with minimal support. One fixer, Maryna, shared that “the most difficult task was to distract my mind from certain things, especially when working in a field where the remnants of 300 people [from the Malaysia Airlines aircraft crash in 2014] were scattered” (Pavliuk 2018). She recounted her most harrowing experiences, including interpreting at the site of the Boeing disaster in 2014 and working in a morgue in Dnipro, where there were concerns that reporters might inadvertently bring grenades. Maryna highlights the inherent dangers of collaborating with various types of journalists, particularly those inclined towards risk-taking, such as adrenaline-seeking photographers and unprepared reporters. Ensuring the safety of the team often required her to demonstrate exceptional judgment and maintain composure under pressure.

Another fixer stated that in certain environments, fixers are often mistaken for their clients, leading to misdirected negative attitudes (Pavliuk 2018). Fixers are also exposed to the potential effects of vicarious trauma. They mediate emotional content, often involving the traumatic experiences of survivors:

The media are like tourists in this situation: they come, work for two weeks, and then leave ... You pass them through yourself when you translate them. And then you sometimes see on the news that these persons have died ... That is why you need to rest, take care of your psychological well-being, and not shy away from working with a psychologist (Stukalo 2023b).

Along these lines, F1 says:

Because I was not there for these 2 years, I was only working 14, 18 h ... besides what they tell me about torture, rape or something like that, then you come to your hotel room ... someone calls you or writes about losses at the front, and it, you know, snowballs, it accumulates in you and it is hard.

Another source of stress may stem from the production process. When the fixer is an experienced local journalist, the international team typically sends the material to the fixer for review prior to publication. When this is overlooked, fixers may feel dissatisfied and frustrated if the product does not align with their expectations. Another challenge noted was professional boundaries and respect. One fixer recounted being asked to perform menial tasks, such as fetching items or providing basic geographical information, even though these could be easily addressed using digital tools. This lack of clarity regarding professional roles can be frustrating, but many fixers adopt a pragmatic approach, concentrating on the broader mission of their work (Hordeyev 2022).

Despite the emotional challenges, many fixers express a deep sense of fulfilment from their work. They view their role as a crucial contribution to both global awareness of the situation and the local communities involved. Fixers often feel driven by the knowledge that their efforts help bring important stories to the forefront, shaping the narrative around the conflict and ensuring the voices of their compatriots are heard. For many fixers, their motivation is closely linked to a sense of duty. Some state that their work is fuelled by its impact on raising awareness of the events in Ukraine. They perceive their role as vital in ensuring the international community understands the realities on the ground, and that sense of purpose helps them navigate emotional hurdles. Another source of satisfaction arises from fixers' personal connections with foreign journalists. Although these relationships can feel emotionally distant, they offer a sense of professional validation and respect. Fixers take pride in their skilful navigation of their complex roles, from ensuring the safety of journalists to helping them gather accurate information. The awareness that their efforts directly contribute to high-quality, impactful journalism serves as a significant source of motivation.

Against this backdrop, fixers in armed conflict zones must have an array of attributes, including stress resilience, patience, and the ability to maintain composure in volatile situations. Yevhen Lobanov highlights the significance of emotional stability and impartiality, emphasising that fixers should prioritise providing unbiased outcomes while minimising personal involvement. The responsibilities of a fixer demand greater effort, stamina, and concentration than traditional interpretation. Calmness, consistency, and self-confidence are crucial for navigating sudden changes and potential military action (Pavliuk 2018).

However, even if they endure constant exposure to traumatic events, fixers often operate without formal psychological training or adequate resources. Rita Burkovska, for example, worked in Bucha following its liberation, documenting the identification and reburial of victims. While her previous research into captivity and violence provided her with coping mechanisms, the work remained profoundly painful, particularly as she witnessed the death of acquaintances. To maintain her emotional well-being, Rita turned to meditation, community support, and specialised training in communicating with trauma survivors and managing burnout (Hrytsai 2023). One participant (F1) recounted her experience applying for a psychological support programme that required

a recommendation from a client. Her client did not provide it, failing to acknowledge her need for support. Ultimately, she secured a referral from another client and participated in the programme.

### ***Ethical Implications***

Maintaining objectivity is one of the most significant ethical challenges for fixers, who often have deep personal ties to their work areas, countries, and origins. As some fixers expressed, it can be overwhelming to collaborate with foreign journalists who may lack a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the conflict. One fixer articulated this challenge succinctly: “I am a citizen of Ukraine, but I cannot prioritise the interests of the newsroom over national security. If there is a ban on traveling to hot spots, then disregarding it becomes both a criminal and reputational liability” (Prokopenko, Lobanok, and Hlushko 2023). Fixers often find themselves in situations where foreign journalists prioritise sensationalism over balanced reporting. One fixer stated that “journalists seek out the most shocking and distressing images. The media is complicit in promoting fear-inducing news ... Audiences gravitate towards frightening, horrific stories, leading journalists to focus on these narratives” (Radio Skovoroda 2022). This pressure to deliver shocking content frequently places fixers in difficult positions. They sometimes have to manage their discomfort, as the pursuit of sensationalism can complicate the roles of translators and producers. Another fixer highlighted how some journalists cross boundaries with intrusive inquiries: “A colleague asked a soldier, ‘How did you kill your first enemy?’ I was taken aback ... Another journalist posed a similar question directly. I wouldn’t have translated it, but the soldier understood English” (Maksymenko 2022). In other cases, personal feelings and identification can lead to disappointment when the final portrayal diverges from what was witnessed and accurately translated. One fixer voiced this frustration, remarking, “it is incredibly disheartening to see a story that misrepresents what you observed and conveyed accurately” (Pavliuk 2018).

Fixers play a crucial role in gatekeeping, influencing which journalists they choose to collaborate with and the stories they are willing to assist in telling. They often evaluate potential clients based on their understanding of a journalist’s intentions and the ethical implications of the work at hand. Fixers may choose to decline engagements with those they suspect may misrepresent the situation or promote harmful narratives. Many fixers prefer to work with established clients or conduct their own verification processes to ensure that their contributions are not misrepresented or manipulated. When afforded the opportunity to review final materials before publication and provide feedback, the likelihood of frustration and ethical conflicts is diminished. Most fixers express satisfaction with their collaborations with international journalists, as these partnerships are frequently long-term or built on trusted recommendations, fostering mutual understanding and respect. Along these lines, fixers often prioritise collaborating with journalists who demonstrate clear support for Ukraine. They believe that this alignment helps prevent unintentional misrepresentation in conflict reporting. One fixer noted “before each interview, journalists emphasised their support for Ukraine. They expressed their commitment to the Ukrainian people and their desire to portray how those here are resisting!” (Bilousenko 2022). This pre-screening process allows fixers to work alongside journalists dedicated to providing accurate and empathetic representations of the

conflict. For fixers, refusing to engage with biased media is a matter of ethics. As one fixer asserted, “definitely yes. I would not work with a client who published distorted information” (Pavliuk 2018).

Challenges can emerge when the final material is edited or condensed without consultation with the fixer. One respondent recalled a well-balanced piece being shortened for publication, resulting in a less-balanced final product. Although this was not ideologically driven, the lack of consultation led to frustration. According to F1, the original version of one video more accurately reflected the sentiments of the military. The shortened version concentrated primarily on certain issues voiced, leaving out significant elements. Notably, a segment omitted showed a wounded serviceman being cheered on by his comrades for his bravery. The interviewee also raised concerns that the face of the serviceman was not blurred or concealed, posing a risk to his safety should he become a prisoner of war. They wished they had been involved in the editing process to provide guidance on potentially sensitive issues.

### **Language and Cultural Mediation**

Despite being fluent in Ukrainian and Russian, many Ukrainians are often hesitant to communicate in Russian due to its association with the adversary. That reluctance is particularly evident in official settings and interactions with the military. One participant noted that even when an international journalist is proficient in both languages, they often rely on a fixer for interpretation, especially when local dialects or Ukrainian phrases influenced by Russian are used.

Fixers must also navigate the complexities of military colloquialisms, which include neologisms and terms that have evolved or acquired new meanings amidst the conflict. These expressions frequently involve sarcasm and wartime irony and may necessitate further explanation. For example, an article in *The Guardian* discusses how the term “avatar” is used to describe a drunken soldier, deriving from a Ukrainian expression that translates to “turning blue,” referencing the blue-skinned characters in James Cameron’s film *Avatar*. In violent contexts, derogatory terms are common; for instance, “orcs” is used to refer to Russian soldiers, while “Mordor” denotes Russia, drawing a parallel with the brutal creatures from *The Lord of the Rings*. It is asserted that “Ukraine’s presence in the global media landscape directly impacts sanctions against Mordor, the supply of weapons, the treatment of our internally displaced persons, and much more” (Maksymenko 2022).

Some military slang is from the Soviet era. For instance, the term “two hundred” refers to soldiers killed in combat. This phrase emerged during the war in Afghanistan, where the fallen were transported in coffins weighing 200 kilograms. Subsequently, “three hundred” became a widely used term for those injured in battle. Additionally, expressions like “cargo 200” and “300” denote the killed and wounded in action. Certain military terms have migrated into civilian language, including slang for weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and radio communication. For example, akin to the English term “Roger,” which confirms receipt of a radio message, the word “plus” is now commonly used in Ukraine and has even made its way into everyday conversation and text messaging with the “+” symbol.

In this context, fixers often serve as mediators not only for language but also for tacit information, non-verbal elements, and accent identification, which can reveal a person’s origins. For instance, one fixer shared their experience of recognising a Russian accent in

someone who claimed to be a local: “As a PhD in linguistics, I’m able to easily differentiate between reduced and full vowels. A Russian-speaking Ukrainian would never say: ‘Knychna niet. Ya zh s Ukrainy, s Slavnska’” (Maksymenko 2022).

Journalists have diverse translation needs; some prefer concise summaries and others precise translations. As one fixer stated, “Some journalists want you to translate very clearly and in detail, and some say, ‘Just tell me in general, what was the point?’” (F4). Fixers often assist with interpretation during interviews, then review or transcribe conversations for accuracy. One fixer mentioned that after recording, they are routinely asked to review the material to check the quotes. (F5). Another fixer highlighted that translation work is essential during the preparation of materials, where they aid in selecting quotes and ensuring synchronisation in audio-visual formats (F6).

Language processing technologies have become increasingly prevalent in translation and communication, particularly in conflict zones where time and accuracy are of the essence. However, these technologies present their own challenges. One fixer pointed out that while tools like Trint or Sonix assist in transcribing and translating recorded material, they often struggle with regional accents or colloquial speech, especially in areas where local dialects prevail (F4). Although technology can facilitate the translation process, it cannot fully replace human expertise.

### **Fixers’ (In)Visibility**

The role of fixers in content creation can vary from following the direction set by the international team to acting as co-authors. However, their contributions are not always acknowledged. While some media outlets include fixers in the credits of longer documentary projects, this often depends on the organisation. Sometimes, fixers employed as staff members of a media outlet may receive more recognition than their externally contracted colleagues on temporary assignments, even though their involvement in producing the material may be largely similar. Not all fixers desire visibility, though. Some express that they and other media professionals on the team often go uncredited due to space constraints. For many, just participating in a meaningful cause contributes significantly to their sense of achievement. By shaping narratives that highlight pressing local issues, fixers ensure their work has a lasting impact. One fixer reflects on that experience, emphasising the importance of feeling useful and having a sense of belonging during the war: “I think it was vital for everyone involved to feel that they could make a difference and that they belonged” (Radio Skovoroda 2022).

In any case, fixers consider that they play a crucial role in shaping narratives, from suggesting story angles to identifying essential elements. For instance, one fixer remarked “They organise the trip; they are responsible for the context ... They actually create the scenario that foreign journalists will operate within; they are responsible for obtaining permits, facilitating communication, and finding key characters.” (Hrytsai 2023). Thus, fixers also influence the direction and impact of the final story. Another fixer shared their approach to generating ideas, stating “I typically offer ten story concepts to choose from, and the team selects 3–4” (Stukalo 2023b). Fixers actively shape how a story resonates with international audiences. Various fixers interviewed and featured in articles emphasised that a skilled fixer can significantly affect how a story is framed for the global community, ensuring it authentically represents Ukraine. In one instance, a

fixer articulated their capacity to introduce diverse perspectives, noting “If the fixer understands the local context well and can communicate that to the journalist, it will greatly enhance the quality of the journalistic material” (Semotiuk 2022).

The role of fixers as (in)visible gatekeepers presents a fascinating insight that aligns with various scholarly reflections in the field of journalism. Eilders (2006) argues that gatekeeping decisions are inherently subjective, with information being selected based on individual criteria and framed according to personal biases and attitudes. Moreover, each individual operates within a social context and is influenced by the myriad forces at play. As numerous gatekeeping studies have shown, the journalistic selection process is shaped by a blend of personal and institutional factors surrounding the gatekeeper (Shoemaker et al. 2001), and fixers serve as gatekeepers in their own right.

## Conclusions

The role of fixers in Ukraine has gained prominence since Russia’s invasion in 2014 and the escalation in 2022, becoming essential in war reporting as it adapts to the needs of international media teams. Fixers undertake a wide range of roles, including organising logistical support, assessing security, translating, guiding, and providing insights into the local context, involving linguistic and cultural mediation. The varied backgrounds of fixers create a unique blend of expertise. Many come from journalism or related fields, such as public relations and communications, while others bring skills in logistics, language, or education.

The contributions of fixers to content can vary significantly, encompassing tasks such as following directions, acting as co-authors, proposing story ideas, arranging important interviews, and shaping story angles that resonate with the realities of Ukraine. Fixers often provide valuable contextual insights, enabling international journalists to uncover angles that would be challenging without local expertise. While some journalists openly acknowledge the substantial contributions of fixers by viewing them as co-authors or producers, that recognition is not universal. Many fixers feel underappreciated, believing their contributions warrant greater visibility. Nonetheless, for some, recognition is secondary to the impact of and sense of purpose they gain from their efforts.

This study has highlighted that fixers often find themselves navigating challenging circumstances where they must balance professional ethics with their personal values and emotions. Gatekeeping plays a crucial role in a fixer’s responsibilities, enabling them to screen potential clients based on ethical considerations. Many fixers conduct pre-screening by assessing the media organisation’s past work and, when feasible, selecting journalists whose viewpoints align with a compassionate depiction of the conflict. Also, the work environment demands significant mental resilience to maintain focus and professionalism. Those working in the field alongside journalists often feel the psychological impact more acutely than those engaged in remote tasks, as they must navigate the delicate balance between empathy for victims and the detachment required to perform their roles. Ethical dilemmas frequently arise, with some fixers grappling with the pressures of journalistic practices that can sometimes prioritise the story over sensitivity. Despite these challenges, many fixers find fulfilment and motivation in their work, viewing their role as essential for shaping the narrative surrounding conflicts and ensuring that local voices are amplified on a global stage.

An interesting implication of the study is that, in an era where the role of journalists as gatekeepers is increasingly challenged, fixers may be re-emerging as crucial gatekeepers in high-risk, low-access environments. As Wallace (2017) suggests, further research is necessary to refine the typology of gatekeepers and the mechanisms of gatekeeping across various platforms, particularly within the context of gatekeeping theory. Analysing these emerging forms of gatekeeping in the digital era has become essential, as the dynamics of this role have evolved to allow broader participation and present greater complexity than ever before. Gatekeeping has transformed into a collaborative process of news dissemination, where multiple gatekeepers, selection mechanisms, and platforms interact (Thorson and Wells 2016). Given the ongoing evolution of war correspondents' work worldwide, future research could explore the role of fixers in addressing the gaps left by professional correspondents on the ground, as well as how social media—utilised by these fixers who decide what to convey and how in various languages—alters the entire concept of war reporting.

Like any study, the present research has its limitations. Firstly, it primarily examines the perspectives of fixers, omitting the viewpoints of foreign journalists. Including these perspectives would be crucial for triangulating data and developing a more comprehensive and accurate narrative. Additionally, the study focuses solely on the perspective of Ukrainian fixers, who may present biased accounts. Nevertheless, we believe that the findings are pertinent to journalism studies, translation studies, social sciences, and peace and conflict studies, particularly in contexts that consider conflicts as communicative interactions. We anticipate that a deeper understanding of the transfer of information across different cultural and linguistic environments will be of practical interest to war reporters and journalists, as well as interpreters and translators engaged in journalistic translation within conflict-affected regions.

## Note

1. Data was collected in line with the ethical guidelines of the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Geneva (Directive relative à l'intégrité dans le domaine de la recherche scientifique et à la procédure à suivre en cas de manquement à l'intégrité) [Guidelines on Scientific Research Integrity and on the Procedure to Follow in the Case of Breach of Integrity].

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Annex 1. Corpus of published testimonies of fixers

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