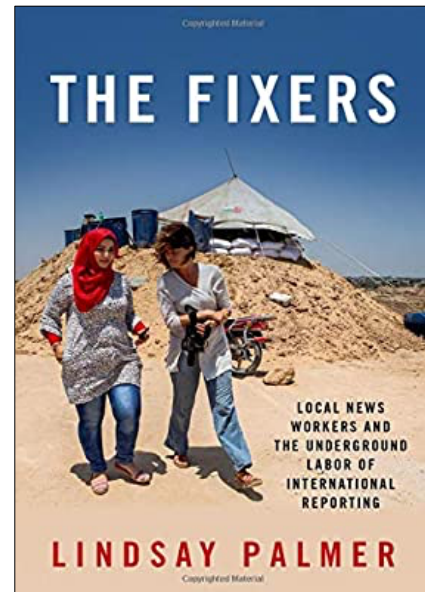


Lindsay Palmer, **The Fixers: Local News Workers and the Underground Labor of International Reporting**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020, 240 pp., \$31.95 (hardcover).

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Lindsay Palmer's new book, *The Fixers: Local News Workers and the Underground Labor of International Reporting*, examines the practices of the cultural intermediaries, informally called "fixers," whom journalists employ while reporting stories internationally (p. 1). These workers "fix" problems that international reporters may face on the ground, including translation, coordination, and geographical or cultural guidance. As news budgets shrink and foreign bureaus close, international journalists increasingly parachute into unfamiliar cultural contexts to report stories. Fixers provide the locally and regionally specific knowledge necessary for international reporting to occur. Despite their essential role in the international news production process, fixers' labor is rarely given enough consideration in the newsroom and remains underexamined in journalism studies. Palmer's book critically examines the ways that journalism industries value and devalue fixers' labor, despite the crucial role they play in international reporting.



While some previous research discusses the roles of fixers in international reporting (Murrell, 2014, 2019; Plaut & Klein, 2019), these studies typically focus on journalists' accounts of fixers' roles in shaping news stories. Palmer importantly contributes to this literature by centering the voices and narratives of fixers in order to better explain their understanding of their roles in the news production process. One of the book's many strengths is the breadth and depth of voices that share their perspectives. Drawing on interviews with 75 fixers from 39 countries and a supplemental 60 interviews with correspondents and news executives, Palmer's research centers a range of voices that are broader than often seen in journalism studies or global media studies. As such, Palmer offers an important contribution to journalism studies that would be of particular interest to global media studies scholars, journalism scholars, international reporting practitioners, and journalism students interested in international reporting.

Although the book is organized by chapters focused on specific types of labor and cultural mediation that fixers perform, three primary arguments run throughout. In her first major argument, Palmer provides a nuanced account of the ways that cultural differences continue to play out within the field of international reporting despite the homogenizing forces of capitalist news industries. Fixers hold power over what types of stories are accessible to international reporters through the process of making the local legible to outsiders. As such, they mediate which stories are told and how they are told, constantly balancing the interests of their employers and their locale. Chapter 1 examines how fixers contribute to the conceptualization of journalistic stories. Fixers work with journalists to effectively tell the story journalists want to report but also complicate

the stories by filling in journalists' knowledge gaps about the people and places being covered. Alternatively, fixers point journalists to new stories when the story a foreign journalist wants to tell is inaccessible due to logistical or cultural reasons, or if the journalist's imagined story misrepresents the actual events. Chapter 2 examines these logistical concerns in more depth, highlighting the ways that time, space, and culture make some stories journalists want to tell impossible. By emphasizing the experiences of fixers, the cooperation and compromise between outsider correspondents and locally knowledgeable fixers highlights how news conglomerates continue to rely on local interpretations despite those corporations' growing international power. This importantly points to the ways in which workers creatively work within and against structures to produce specific conceptualizations of texts, complicating narratives on the ways that global conglomerates wield a homogenizing power.

Second, Palmer argues that fixers provide skilled labor as cultural mediators through the creative ways that they perform both editorial and logistical work. News organizations largely frame fixers as workers who provide passive logistical work, therefore framing their work as unskilled. Palmer rejects this notion by showing how fixers foreground the performative nature of their work in their stories, where each news story and task requires creative solutions to mediating between multiple cultural representations. Chapter 1 begins to highlight the cultural mediation tasks fixers perform by examining how fixers complicate journalists' stories with their locally specific knowledge. Their cultural mediation is explored in more depth in chapter 4, which focuses on fixers' roles as translators and interpreters. The fixers' stories in this chapter foreground the difficulty of translation. The emotions, meanings behind specific words, and cultural knowledge embedded in language complicate the process of translation and require fixers to perform creative work in mediating between two languages and cultures for journalists and their sources.

Finally, Palmer argues that fixers function within a global economy where their labor is valued unequally based on their locally specific contexts despite their essential roles in international reporting. Although international reporting would be nearly impossible without fixers, fixers remain precariously employed and undervalued by news industries. Fixers are typically hired as freelance employees who do not receive compensation for the relational work they constantly perform with their communities, as explored in chapter 3, and frequently do not receive insurance despite the dangerous positions they often encounter in the field, as explored in chapter 5. Fixers' pay also varies based on regional or local costs of living, so fixers in Africa are paid less than those in the Middle East, who are themselves paid less than fixers in the United States or Europe. Through this argument, Palmer takes a near-activist stance calling for fixers' work to be both more recognized and valued by the news industry, as well as more heavily discussed in the academy.

Beyond its compelling arguments, the book's largest strength lies in its use of theory in conceptualizing cultural identity. Drawing on Hall (2003), Palmer highlights how cultural identity is not static but a continual production that is constantly in negotiation. By examining cultural identity through this lens, Palmer escapes from problematically simplistic views of the local, regional, national, and global as discrete entities, instead conceptualizing them as mutually constitutive. The ways fixers and reporters perform their identities are therefore more complex than simple binaries—like local and global, self and other, Western and non-Western—offer. Many of Palmer's interview subjects have lived or extensively traveled in multiple national settings and have engaged with many perspectives different from their own. Thus, fixers' knowledge goes beyond just the local, providing them ways of thinking about their work that assist in their roles as cultural

mediators. Conceptualizing fixers' cultural identities with this level of theoretical nuance allows Palmer to make her larger arguments convincingly because fixers' complex cultural identities inform the ways they engage with their tasks: Fixers constantly balance competing interests, identities, and audiences in their conception and production of stories alongside journalists.

These negotiations speak to an ongoing question arising throughout the book about the difficulties of journalistic objectivity during instances of cultural mediation. Journalists are often skeptical of fixers' work, especially translation, being considered a creative cultural practice because translation requires adapting the story to a different context and, thus, removing objectivity. Yet, due to cultural, linguistic, and commercial differences between global news organizations, Palmer argues there is little to be gained from the belief that there is one objective version of events for journalists to report globally. Instead, Palmer critically notes that fixers try to convey the cultural context of events to journalists and that these interpretations of events always rely on both journalists' and fixers' abilities to come to an understanding about what occurred. Reporting on events is therefore contingent on the journalists' abilities to convey cultural context.

Although it falls beyond the scope of the book, *The Fixers* raises interesting questions about the political economy of fixers' labor. Palmer briefly addresses the differences in pay between fixers around the world but does not fully examine how this work relates to the valuation of stories in specific nations from global news organizations. While there is some discussion of how fixers endeavor to overcome their devaluation, there is more work to be done examining how fixers organize and coordinate to overcome these disparities. These omissions run parallel to Palmer's primary goals for the book and offer an important path forward for future research on fixers.

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