

**Title:** Why Journalists Covered Syria The Way They Did. On the role of economic, social and cultural capital.

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**Abstract:**

While recent decades have seen the rise of a vast body of work on war reporting, there have only been few sociological explanations of why journalists deal with challenging situations in particular ways. This article contributes to bridging the gap between practice-based studies of war reporting and general sociological studies of journalism as a profession, by providing a systematically sociological account of the factors that influenced how the Syrian conflict was covered by Dutch and Flemish reporters working for a wide range of media. In doing so, this article draws on 12 in-depth interviews with those reporters, which is informed by a content analysis of their work, and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of economic, social and cultural capital on both an institutional and individual level. In addition, it is argued that Bourdieusian analyses may be further developed by distinguishing between endogenous and exogenous forms of cultural capital.

**Key words:** Syria; Middle East; war journalism; journalistic practices; sociology of journalism; Pierre Bourdieu.

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## **Introduction**

While recent decades have seen the rise of a vast body of work on war reporting, there have only been few sociological explanations of why journalists deal with challenging situations in particular ways. On the one hand, journalism research on (Middle East) conflicts has resulted in countless content analyses (Allan and Zelizer 2004), the changing nature of state-media relations (Tumber and Webster 2006; Wolfsfeld 1997), the political economy of foreign news (Herman and Chomsky 1998) and the everyday practices of individual war reporters (Markham 2011; Seib 2006; Tumber and Palmer 2004; Tumber and Webster 2006). Rooted in an entirely different tradition, a more sociological type of enquiry has mapped the micro, mezzo and macro factors influencing journalistic practices (Hess 1994; Schudson 2003; Reese 2001), and the professional values and role conceptions guiding their actions (Deuze 2005; Weaver and Willnat 2012).

In spite of this double wealth of scholarship, however, fruitful combinations of the two are still comparably rare (Tumber and Webster 2006). That is, while journalism research on Middle East conflicts mainly revolves around changing empirical practices, their more sociologically oriented colleagues have limited their attention to either more general issues in the field of journalism as a whole (e.g. on objectivity and professional autonomy), or to particular studies of all but war reporting (e.g. the changing impact of social media, citizen journalism or newsroom ethnographies to name only a few). More specifically, the recent conflict in Syria, has fed into a growing body of work on citizen journalism and digital activism (Wall and El Zahed 2015), the psychosocial conditions of journalists covering Syria (Feinstein and Starr 2015), and the news stories produced by different media (Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2014). What has received only scant attention, however, is first, the particular strategies journalists have used to face the particular challenges in covering the Syrian conflict (Salama 2012), and second, how these diverging strategies can be explained sociologically. This article therefore seeks to contribute to bridging the gap between these strands of the literature by providing a systematically sociological account of the factors that influenced how the Syrian conflict was covered differently by Dutch and Flemish reporters working for a range of media. In doing so, the article draws on 13 in-depth interviews with those reporters, and on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of economic, social and cultural capital. I argue journalists' strategies in dealing with challenging situations such as those prevailing in Syria, can be understood by examining, firstly, the structural position and editorial identity of media organisations in the national media-landscape, and secondly, by taking into account individual journalists' objective positions within these media organisations, and their previous professional socialisation. These factors may thus help us improve our understanding of why journalists deal with similar situations in different ways, which ultimately impacts on how the news is selected and presented at the end of the day.

## **1. Covering Syria: Practical and Moral Challenges to Journalistic Autonomy**

Reporters covering Middle East conflicts often face challenging situations, in which their everyday routines are transformed into more creative strategies to maintain both their professional autonomy and the quality of the stories they produce. While the fundamental contours of these challenges are pertinent to war journalism, their more subtle form varies along particular times and places. In the

following paragraphs, I only briefly sketch the most fundamental obstacles and difficulties that were confronted by Dutch and Flemish reporters, given that they are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Author forthcoming). As these findings are strongly in line with Viviane Salama's (2012) findings, it can be assumed that these reporting conditions are more widely spread among journalists covering Syria. A first range of challenges were more practical in nature: besides the evident risks and dangers involved in entering a frontline, the different parties involved in wars generally attempt to influence news coverage by limiting access to locations and persons, by increasing identification with a particular side by embedding journalists among army units, or by reframing media coverage through a myriad of more subtle discursive techniques (Tumber and Webster 2006). Furthermore, in trying to avoid these difficulties, journalists often rely quite intensely on local fixers as their 'eyes and their ears' (Palmer and Fontan 2007). In Syria more specifically, the reporters I interviewed claimed that they could only enter the country through either official visa obtained from the regime, or by embedding themselves with particular rebel groups. Reporters who had worked with rebels were considered persona non grata by the Syrian Ministry of Information, while reversely, journalists working through the official channels in some cases risked their footage to be used by Syrian state media, albeit with a different message. Officially visiting Syria further implied being continuously accompanied by 'minders', employees of the Syrian 'Ministry of Information' working as fixers to guard over reporters' safety and to 'enable' them to gain access to different places. In addition to these more intricate difficulties, reporters were also explicitly targeted in attacks and abductions from either sides of the conflict, even more than they were in earlier conflicts in the region (Reporters Without Borders 2013). Besides these practical challenges, war reporting is traditionally characterised by a number of moral-emotional challenges. Most of them boil down to the following three dilemmas: whom, when and how to *humanise* particular subjects and stories; how to deal with *emotional experiences* (as distinct from verified facts and interpretative contexts); and what stance to take towards *moral appeals*, whether based on indignation or empathy, or on universal or particular suffering (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2008; Ashturi and Pinchevski 2009; Seib 2006). In Syria, these challenges took the following concrete forms: horrifying, detailed images and stories of torture and abuse were widely and continuously available to any journalist visiting Syria and its neighbouring countries; similarly, intensely emotional narratives were ubiquitous and easily accessible, most notably perhaps in some of the largest refugee camps the world has ever seen; and the parties involved in the conflict seemed more sophisticated than in previous conflicts to make use of emotions such as empathy, indignation and guilt to their own advantage (ranging from cyber-activists posting films of children being rescued from underneath the rubbles of houses bombed by the Syrian army, to the regime inviting journalists to witness ordinary Syrians' heart-breaking return to their destroyed homes after armed rebel groups were driven away). Hence it comes as no surprise that journalists covering the Syrian conflict are generally more prone to psychological trauma and depression compared to those covering previous Middle East conflicts (Feinstein and Starr 2015).

## **2. Data and Methods**

Before proceeding on to the more theoretical discussion on how economic, social and cultural capital influences the strategies journalists revoke to in dealing with these situations, we need to elaborate on

the data and the methods on which this article is based. More precisely, this study draws on 13 in-depth interviews with Dutch and Flemish reporters who made reports on Syria between January 2011 and June 2014. At that point, the conflict had taken a substantially sectarian and international turn, leading an estimated 6.5 million Syrians to flee their homes, and 1.5 million crossing the border in a search for shelter. The Islamic State or Daesh, on the other hand, had only just begun its rather spectacular rise (Author, forthcoming).

While attempts were made to include all reporters in the Dutch-speaking area that had travelled to Syria, approximately 2/3 of this group effectively participated in the research. Hence these reporters were employed by a variety of media including both public and commercial broadcasters, as well as traditional broadsheets and alternative online media. On an individual level, this group included permanent correspondents, specialised and generalist parachutists and free-lancers. It is precisely this variety which should make it possible to relate these journalists' diverging practices to both the media organisation they work for, and to the individual position these reporters take within those media. However, as some of the issues discussed are of a rather sensitive nature - given the insecure conditions of journalists working in and around Syria (Reporters Without Borders 2013) - the names, gender and affiliations of the participating journalists are anonymised.

Perhaps more importantly, these interviews were preceded and informed by an elaborate study of the participating journalists' news stories, consisting of a general content analysis of all their reports on Syria, and of an in-depth, qualitative analysis of up to 30 of their reports. On the one hand, these analyses provided data that was relevant in itself, exploring how the Syrian conflict was covered by Dutch and Flemish journalists. In this article, however, these content analyses are not discussed as such. Instead, they served only as a means to design and structure the interviews in such a manner to avoid overly conscious, self-reflexive replies on general issues. In other words, these preparatory analyses allowed me to develop at least a minimal 'outside' perspective on these journalists' practices, as distinct from their own accounts when asked about them. Instead of asking them about their general practices or inciting reflections on abstract values or role conceptions, I thus formulated questions on highly specific reports and the circumstances in which they were produced: where did the idea for this particular story come from? Who was involved? And what were the roles played by editors, fixers and your personal network? This approach allowed me to concentrate more on journalists' actual strategies, as distinct from their conscious reflections or discourses (Bourdieu 1977), and to include into the analysis the specific contexts in which they made use of interpretative repertoires (Markham 2011; Tumber 2006).

Nevertheless, it should be clear that this method is still haunted by some fundamental shortcomings, as interviewing pushes scholars closer towards the 'emic' perspective of journalists themselves, as opposed to the more objectivist 'etic' stance (ideally) taken by social scientists (Geertz 1973; Bourdieu 1977). To be more precise, interviewing led me to concentrate more on the positive aspects of journalists' strategies and how they used their skills to deal with challenging situations. For instance, it was much easier to acquire data on how they managed to maintain their autonomy in spite of difficult circumstances, than it was to find evidence on how they might have sometimes given up their impartiality in favour of a sensational story. While designing the interview questions to concentrate on

their practices did help me in addressing some of the problems caused by interviews' reflexive fallacy, it thus did not suffice to avoid them entirely – something which is perhaps close to impossible in the case of war reporting, as access to the field in order to observe simply entails too many risks.

### **3. Economic, Social and Cultural Capital**

In spite of Pierre Bourdieu's work's general popularity in cultural sociology, his work as only quite recently found its way to journalism and media scholars (Benson and Neveu, 2005; Garnham 1993; Marlière 1998; Myles 2010; Willig 2012). In this article, only one particular aspect of his writings will be discussed in detail: the role of economic, social and cultural capital, both on the level of individual journalists and the organisations or institutions they work for. In Bourdieusian theory (1977; 1984), social actors such as journalists and media organisations, occupy objective positions within a particular social field. These objective positions are determined by the volume and type of capital actors have gathered, that is, the skills and dispositions that allow them to produce particular types of news reports, from a range of given situations and contexts (cultural capital), the width and quality of their social network (social capital), and material benefits such as wages and revenues from sales and advertisements (economic capital). Within every field, social actors are engaged in a continuous struggle to achieve as much capital as possible, which enables them to negotiate their autonomy from, for instance their editors' policies, or state and market pressures (Schudson 2005). In doing so, they try to distinguish themselves from competing colleagues and media organisations by means of the quality and the nature of their reports.

Besides being the currency actors in the field strive after, these forms of capital also serve as resources and skills allowing them to act within the field. This means that the volume and the nature of the capital they possess may provide an explanation for how they deal with particular situations.

On the institutional level, *economic capital* refers primarily to the material and financial resources of a particular media organisation, including their audience ratings (Bourdieu 1996). *Cultural capital*, in turn, can be understood as the higher status often ascribed to quality newspapers and public service broadcasters, as compared to tabloids and commercial broadcasters. To be sure, this status differential is most visible in the mission statement of the public service broadcasters or the task quality media see for themselves in providing the public with reliable and relevant information, allowing them to live up to the ideal of engaged citizens.

On the individual level, *economic capital* can be understood as the material resources journalists rely on for producing news stories, including their income, their guarantee for work (e.g. free-lancers, stringers and permanent correspondents), editorial support for going abroad, and having at one's disposal the time and freedom needed to make longer reports with less predictable outcomes. Following Granovetter's (1973) work on strong and weak ties, *social capital* refers to the width and depth of journalists' social network, that is, the number of relevant people they know, and the degree to which they can be relied upon. *Cultural capital*, lastly, refers to the skills that are particularly important for journalists covering the Middle East, such as the simple asset of knowing how to write a news story, and having a basic notion of Arabic languages and cultures (cf. Bourdieu 1991). It is worth elaborating in more detail on the specific nature of cultural capital in the case of individual journalists,

as media scholars taking cues from Bourdieu have mostly focused on the institutional level for explaining journalistic practices (Benson 2004 and 2006).

In explaining why individual actors behave and think the way they do, Bourdieu (1977; with Passeron 1977) developed the notion of 'habitus', referring to the ensemble of internalised dispositions and perception schemes individuals use, largely unconsciously, to order their actions, thoughts, feelings and experiences. Individuals obtain these experiential predispositions and cognitive schemes from the social fields and surroundings in which they grow up, receive their education and develop their identities. How they perceive particular situations, and which social strategies they have at their disposal, are thus determined primarily by their historically contingent habitus. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1977; with Passeron 1977) ascribed a particular importance to early socialisation processes in forming the foundational structures onto which later experiences are captured. In the case of journalists, these early socialisation processes can be related to where and how they learned the trade and developed particular skills. Viewed from this perspective, part of reporters' 'habitus' thus operates as a specific form of cultural capital in the journalistic field, enabling them to acquire, maintain or even improve their objective positions within the field.

In addition to Bourdieu, however, I draw an additional distinction between forms of cultural capital that are endogenous and exogenous to the journalistic field. *Endogenous forms of cultural capital* consist of those skills and resources journalists have acquired from within the journalistic field, such as internalising its key values, procedures and conventions, and mastering the most important news genres. Reporters predominantly relying on endogenous cultural capital have oftentimes taken what Ulf Hannerz (2004) refers to as the classical trajectory of foreign news correspondents: after beginning their career as regional news workers, they have been promoted to a domestic news team, before ending up in a home-based foreign news desk. Prior to becoming foreign correspondents, who may of course specialise themselves in a particular region, they have thus learned to think and experience potential news stories as a journalist is expected to do – as opposed to, for instance, perceiving these social stories as a local. At the very base of their professional career, furthermore, often lies a more general type of education, such as practical journalism courses or university degrees in communication and Germanic languages. What is of particular interest to our purposes, is thus not so much whether journalists function as generalists or specialists within their current employment (Marchetti 2005), but rather, whether and how they were professionally socialised to perceive and experience social encounters as a proper journalist.

*Exogenous forms of cultural capital*, on the other hand, refer to the experiential structures, perception schemes and general skills they acquired outside the journalistic field. A typical example would be a middle east reporter who obtained an excellent command of Arab language and culture through formal degrees or even by living in the Middle East, before becoming a journalist. Less obviously, some journalists attempted to renegotiate the established genres or formats through which they were expected to tell their story. In the most moderate cases, these stylistic adventurers sought inspiration from foreign journalistic traditions (e.g. the French literary style, in a predominantly objectivist representational climate), whereas in more extreme cases, they drew on literary authors such as George Orwell or José Saramago, or on methodological courses they had acquired in a degree of

anthropology (e.g. for deciding which story to select). Again, the main point for our purposes is not so much journalists' degree of specialisation, as the perception schemes and experiential dispositions with which they encounter possible news stories.

Perhaps it is worth emphasising, to conclude, that these two types of cultural capital should be seen as two extreme poles of a continuum in which journalists can occupy a myriad of composite positions. One of the participating reporters, for instance, worked himself up along the classical trajectory from regional to foreign news, and increasingly sought to specialise himself in the Middle East by taking Arab language and culture classes in his spare time. In the opposite direction, one of the respondents started his career as a free-lance fixer because of his specialised knowledge of a particular city and country, but grew out to become a professional journalist covering a variety of places and stories after mastering some of the elementary tricks of the trade. While the distinction between endogenous and exogenous forms of cultural capital could be operationalised as a more rigid classification criterion, for instance for doing quantitative research (e.g. by focussing on variables such as specific or general education background, and the time spent within the journalistic trade before becoming a topical specialist), in this article, it serves rather as a tool to qualitatively understand why and how journalists perceive and experience similar situations differently.

#### **4. Towards a sociological explanation of diverging practices**

In the following pages I explore to what extent the notions of economic, social and cultural capital may be helpful in explaining the differences between how reporters deal with the challenges they are confronted with in covering Syria. I begin with discussing the impact of the institutional context in which journalists act, before moving on to their individual strategies.

##### **4.1 Institutional level**

In the Belgian and Dutch media landscape, an important distinction can be drawn between public and private news broadcasters. Up until today, the former have much larger budgets at their disposal, and are generally oriented towards informing its public on a wide variety of current affairs, even if these topics do not seem of direct interest to the domestic audience (cf. what Hallin and Mancini 2004 have called the 'democratic corporatist' media model). As a result, public broadcasters have invested much more means into foreign news coverage than their commercial counterparts. In both Flanders and the Netherlands, they have been the only media organisation able and willing to invest in having full-time reporters on both sides of the conflict.

The Dutch public broadcaster NOS's flagship news programme, more precisely, has been able to employ 2 permanent reporters to the Middle East, with one of them entering Syria through the official channels, and the other one visiting rebel-held areas. The Flemish VRT, on the other hand, has developed a different strategy of dealing with foreign news. While they generally devote an equally considerable space to foreign news (De Smedt 2014), their slightly smaller budget only allows a comparably smaller network of foreign correspondents, with no reporters stationed permanently in the Middle East. Their strategy is twofold: on the one hand, their reports are more limited to short, detached news reports on facts and images that were retrieved from international newsfeeds, such as

the EVN network – for which the Dutch NOS has no subscription. On the other hand, the VRT relies on a small number of home-based desk-workers specialised in particular regions or topics, with two of them concentrating on the Middle East.

One of these two reporters has been able to transpose this specialist status into a considerable degree of autonomy throughout his career, employing his own sub-team of researchers and supporting staff. This large institutional support enables him to explore the available information on uncertain situations more thoroughly. Furthermore, this high-profile reporter regularly visits (Middle East) conflict zones for the VRT's flagship news programme as well as for current affairs broadcasts, in which he is allowed comparably more freedom than his colleagues to just 'see and come up with something' that crosses his path. While his autonomy thus enables him to search for stories that would not easily make it into the news, his comparably frequent visits also allow him to show different perspectives on the conflict, by going embedded with the regime, Islamic extremist and Kurdish armed units sequentially.

The VRT's second home-based reporter focussing on the Middle East is granted considerably less autonomy. His visits are fewer in number and shorter in length, which affects the chances of facing uncertain situations and from developing more sustained, long-term forms of moral engagement. As his visits require more detailed planning prior to leaving, the reports he produces are generally more confined within traditional story lines such as visiting one of the largest refugee camps, and often revolving around events that are announced in advance, such as the Geneva peace conferences in 2013 and 2014. In other words, his reports are slightly more predictable, following the path of safe journalistic formats and genres.

The VRT and NOS's commercial counterparts, in contrast, have a much more limited interest in foreign news, which is reflected by the smaller budget they provide to cover its costs. The most important commercial prime time news programme in the Netherlands, for instance, has only one correspondent covering the entire Middle East, whereas the Flemish commercial broadcaster has none. Instead, the latter employ a moderately specialised parachute journalist covering conflicts across the globe. These news programmes are therefore much more limited to hard news events, with sources stemming mainly from statements of key political actors, complemented with occasional visits to the scene on which the biggest statements are made. As a result, his visits to Syria and its neighbouring countries have been limited to one or two-day visits, and have been annulated more than once due to the sudden emergence of more urgent events occurring elsewhere. Understandably, these journalists did not consider the moral function of witnessing people's subjective suffering to be a fundamental part of their job – in contrast to their colleagues working for the public broadcasting channel. Their media organisation neither provided them with the means to develop such engagements, nor did they put high value on subjectivist genres in foreign news.

Among the newspapers, similar fault lines could be distinguished between self-proclaimed quality newspapers and populist tabloids, with only the former regularly employing foreign correspondents. The central importance they ascribed to providing high quality information on the wider world can account for both their general cosmopolitan outlook – expressed by the relative importance of foreign affairs in the structure of the newspapers, and the chances of foreign news reaching the front page -



as well as their material support for reporters covering the Middle East. A further, more subtle distinction should be drawn, between quality newspapers with either a centre-left or a centre-right political orientation. The former devoted considerably more attention to ordinary people's suffering. They thereby proactively suggested their reporters to visit scenes that would 'humanise' the Syrian conflict, and supported them both financially and in terms of the appreciation expressed by the place those stories were ascribed in the newspaper – occasionally granting them a prominent spot on the front page. Apart from stimulating a morally engaging attitude, they also led their reporters to make use of phenomenological reporting methods (Murrell 2009) in uncertain situations, allowing them to rely on their senses as a form of providing proof.

Broadsheets with a centre-right orientation, on the other hand, appeared to be more interested in the political, military and historical aspects of the conflict. These genre requirements stimulated reporters to deal with uncertain situations and unverifiable facts by relying more on their interpretational skills, rather than resorting to phenomenological descriptions. As a result, any moral engagements appeared in a more subtle, less denunciatory form: rather than appearing at the heart of the story, these moral-emotional narratives emerged as exemplifications of a complex political struggle. When reporters were occasionally sent out for more personal, subjective stories, this would also be more closely related to hard news events, such as a recent change in power relations – rather than serving as a news item in and of itself.

## **4.2 Individual Level**

Within these broader institutional confines, individual journalists relied on different types and volumes of economic, social and cultural capital. As each of these forms of capital has an impact on journalists' general practices and perceptions, they also influenced how they responded to practical impediments and moral dilemmas in covering Syria.

### **4.2.1 Economic capital**

In terms of their economic capital, three types of journalists can be distinguished: permanently stationed foreign correspondents, home-based reporters or parachutists occasionally visiting the Middle East, and free-lancers working for a range of broadcast, print and alternative media. First, foreign correspondents were generally able to cover different aspects of the war, as they were financially supported by their employers to visit different scenes on different occasions. As a result, they could devote at least part of their attention to the impact of the Syrian civil war on its neighbouring countries – thereby moving beyond the relatively well-known topic of refugee camps. Foreign correspondents would also have relatively good hopes of entering the country through the official channels, as they could provide the Syrian 'Ministry of Information' with the right professional credentials. Furthermore, they worked together with local fixers on a more regular basis, and were more familiar with the system of 'minders' and secret agents. This enabled them to broaden their social networks, as well as to strengthen these social ties by developing reciprocal trust.

Parachutists, the second group of journalists, showed some substantial variation among their budgets. Those with relatively high budgets had more freedom to move about in the region, which resulted in

more in-depth reporting, in which subjective elements could be cumulated and framed as objective proof. Having a bigger budget also allowed them to visit conflict zones several times, thus focussing on different places and people, and rendering subjective and phenomenological methods more multi-perspectival. Reporters working for low-budget teams, in contrast, often had limited time for immersing themselves into singular themes. Hence they were bounded more often to plans that were negotiated at the news room prior to departure, which led them to stay closer to traditional, safe story lines, such as refugee camps, or interviews with prominent politicians.

Freelancers, the third group of journalists, were driven by the imperative to find niches in the journalistic field. As a consequence, freelancers generally resorted to more subjective, phenomenological methods, even if this went against their own conceptions of good journalism. All of the free-lancers I interviewed told me that their reports would only be accepted if they took a personal, witnessing perspective, rather than focussing on the more detached-tone concomitant with hard news events or political interpretations. According to them, editors claimed to rely on their own staff to provide the factual, political context of a particular story. Furthermore, freelancers received a lower degree of security-support from their employers – even though they would not buy a report if it had been produced in too dangerous conditions – which rendered them much more dependent on local fixers. Their position also made it unlikely to acquire official via, as their employers did not vouch for their credentials.

#### **4.2.2 Social capital: Strong and Weak Ties**

Disposing of an elaborate and rich social network is one of the key tools foreign correspondents rely on (Hannerz 2004). A first type of social contact are personal ties with locals – often developed by expats-turned-journalists prior to their journalistic career. These ‘strong’ ties proved to be extraordinarily important in circumventing problems of practical access. In two rather extreme cases, these ties enabled reporters to remain undercover inside Syria in the early months of the uprisings. In other cases, strong ties allowed journalists to interview a variety of Syrian citizens through Skype, whom they knew long before they became relevant from a journalistic perspective. On a different level, strong ties enabled reporters to estimate the trustworthiness of the former’s claims and stories. In quite some occasions, they argued either feeling more at ease with spreading their stories – as they simply trusted them more than they would trust strangers - or being more able to cast substantial doubts on their accounts, because they knew their background and current situation. Lastly, these strong ties incited them to develop a different type of moral engagement, as some of the actors involved were simply friends. In that case, their moral proximity did not manifest itself in the form of a responsibility to witness ascribed to the journalistic field (Ashuri and Pinchevski 2009), but rather more simply as a concern for their friends’ well-being. In one particular case this led a reporter who explicitly denounced journalists pretending to fulfil a moral responsibility both in his work and in the interview, to respond furiously to a colleague who showed little respect for Muslim victims of the Chemical attacks in August 2013.

Journalists who did not possess these strong ties, on the other hand, were much more dependent on local, salaried fixers. In most cases, this dependence was addressed by means of journalists’ wider

professional network, as they relied on fixers recommended by international reporters. A considerable part of their time was therefore devoted to calling other journalists, informing whether they knew reliable fixers, or, more generally, how they would be able to gain access to particular peoples and stories. Instead of relying on personal ties with people they knew, these journalists would try to advance by getting a higher quantity and variety of opinions on one particular interviewee or fixer. Lastly, both the strong and weak tie approaches contrasted starkly with the situation in which young parachutist free-lancers found themselves. As they generally lacked both type of ties in the region and in the journalistic field, they were much more prone to high-risk situations and partial access, as their salary-paid fixers turned out to be unreliable more often than not.

#### **4.2.3 Endogenous and Exogenous cultural capital**

##### ***Practical impediments***

Based on the particular nature of their cultural capital, individual journalists can be situated on a continuum with endogenous cultural capital on the one side of the spectrum, and exogenous cultural capital on the other. Reporters situated on the *endogenous* pole, initially learned their skills and acquired their training mostly within the journalistic field. Almost as a rule, these journalists had received a more general type of higher education, such as journalism, communication sciences, politics or (Germanic) languages. More often than not they had worked their way up from regional media to a foreign news desk, typically accumulating more than a decade of experience in domestic news coverage (Hannerz 2004). More importantly for our purposes, these journalists showed a greater tendency towards procedural conservatism, as they highly valued staying loyal to rigorous verification measures and authoritative sources such as international newsfeeds and official statements. In case their reports did contain unverified information, this was generally dealt with through an ‘interpretation’ of the statements and information that was available – as opposed to, for instance, using phenomenological methods.

On the other side of the spectrum stood *journalists who had accumulated more exogenous forms of cultural capital*. These reporters had received more specific forms of education, such as Arabic languages and cultures or conflict studies, and in some cases they had lived in the Middle East or Syria before becoming a journalist. Most of their journalistic experience had been effectively obtained on the spot, rather than through previous employment in the media. As a result, they were strongly specialised in the region itself, with particularly good knowledge of, for instance, the region’s politics, history or culture.

Judging by the anecdotes emerging from the interviews, the latter seemed generally better equipped to deal with a number of practical problems, for which endogenously trained journalists would rely on fixers. Their good command of the Syrian Arab dialect, for instance, had allowed several of them to identify minders’ wilfully wrong translations, as well as to be more sensitive to the sometimes quite subtle intimidation of their interviewees. Their knowledge of the local cultures and ways of going about further enabled them to be at ease with some of the minders and to develop relationships of trust, granting them a certain degree of freedom to move about – anecdotes such as these typically did not emerge from interviews with parachutists, in spite of their informational expertise on the region. To my

surprise, some of the journalists most familiar with the Syrian system, had even succeeded in filing complaints on specific minders at the Ministry of Information, which resulted in them being awarded a different, more easy-going minder on their next visit. Similarly, their knowledge of the everyday local culture also enabled them to interpret the behaviour and stories of subjects they would report on, as they were able to grasp non-verbal cues in the way people talked about specific issues topics or tried to evade them.

In between these two extreme poles are journalists with more or less mixed forms of endogenous and exogenous cultural capital. In their cases, the specific nature and composition of cultural capital proved to be decisive. One journalist, for instance, had worked his way up from regional to foreign news desks, and had taken extra classes in standard Arabic. While his command of Arabic was relatively modest compared to that of the expatriates-turned-journalists, he claimed it was enough to enable him to earn local people's trust more easily, and hence to interview a wider variety of individuals, as well as exerting at least a minimal level of control on minders' and fixers' translations. Some of these reporters also had acquired a particular form of cultural capital, as they were initially trained in investigative journalism. In certain occasions this was clearly reflected in the design of their reports. One of the journalists who adopted the strategy of complementing the verifiable news stories with a more subjective report on his own accord, had indeed received most of his training not in the daily news, but in investigative journalism. These journalists were more inclined to work in team, and to leave the double-checking of information to specialists colleagues. They experienced this way of working as quite comfortable: this way, they complemented one another by resorting to their specialised skills and capacities, rather than having to stumble upon unknown terrain time and again. Furthermore, a particular schooling in the narrative techniques of feature writing and 'adventuralism' proved to be decisive in using phenomenological methods for providing evidence. Reporters using these methods or techniques had developed them outside their traditional journalistic training, by means of literature, teaching assignments or anthropology – in contrast to more endogenous narrating forms, such as the traditional news reports centred around either succinctly communicating key information or providing a wider contextual analysis. After this initial training, they then typically developed these skills either through a post-graduate training in journalism schools or – more likely – by means of an elaborate, long-term self-study of feature writing manuals or foreign media broadcasts such as the BBC or La Deux.

### ***Moral dilemmas***

How did these forms of cultural capital influence the way journalists dealt with morally intense situations? Journalists endowed with predominantly endogenous cultural capital addressed these situations in roughly two ways. First, some sought to maintain an objective, critical distance, centred around caution and double-checking any information with multiple, independent sources. They generally resorted to statements or reports made by authoritative persons or institutions, such as those written by renowned NGO's such as Human Rights Watch. These journalists declined from incorporating strongly subjective stories, arguing that they did not want to 'give in' to sensationalist,

emotional forms of news. In other words, reporters who were trained more traditionally within the confines of the journalistic field, tended to be more precautionary in using subjective material.

Secondly, and in spite of their inclinations, these endogenously socialised journalists did allow more subjective reporting practices under quite specific conditions: they only included intense emotional accounts if they could be integrated within some of the most traditional, well-known story lines, such as portraying the condition of children in a refugee camp in midwinter. These comparably 'safe' choices allowed them to include more subjective, human elements whilst remaining well within the confines of the traditional rules prescribed by 'good journalism'.

Journalists predominantly socialised outside the journalistic field, in contrast, generally felt more at ease with subjective reporting practices, as they felt it allowed them to stay closer to the social and cultural reality surrounding them. As I noted earlier, their command of local cultures, languages and politics inclined them to develop closer, more durable relationships based on mutual trust with the people they were reporting on, thus making it more plausible that the emotions and stories they encountered were authentic. More importantly in terms of the distance they sought to bridge between their audience and their interviewees, was that these journalists were more inclined to consider their job as having a considerable moral function, in witnessing ordinary people's suffering. This can probably be accounted for by the specific trajectory they had taken before taking up their current position in the foreign news reporting. Rather than being trained as generalist reporters – who considered disseminating *information* as their foremost task – they were often trained in social fields where priority is given to closer and stronger human ties, instead of detached, more ephemeral interactions. The subjects they reported on were fellow human beings with a particular identity, rather than objects of the latest news – in the most extreme cases, these journalists would consider some of their interviewees as their friends rather than strangers.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

This essay began with noting a peculiar gap in journalism studies. On the one hand, scholars have systematically mapped journalists' general norms and values, and their relation to social-demographic and socio-economic variables, and the (national) media systems they work in. On the other hand, a range of studies have described particular reporting practices, such as covering conflict and peace, or the rise of so-called citizen journalism. What has been missing in both strands of the literature, I argued, is the precise link between these more general or structural role conceptions and predispositions, and the particular strategies journalists revoke to when faced with concrete challenges. The particular merit of a perspective building on Pierre Bourdieu's work, then, lies in provides us with a battery of concepts that enables relating these structural conditions to micro-social strategies, and the ever so subtle experiential predispositions and cognitive schemes from which they come forth.

The specific case Dutch and Flemish journalists covering the Syrian conflict, furthermore, proved to be instrumental in laying bear a number of concrete diverging practices. In their attempts to produce news stories on Syria, journalists were confronted with situations that challenged their journalistic autonomy, as they could seldom revoke to, for instance, a wide variety of reliable sources, nor could they

maintain an emotional-moral distance as easily as at least some of them would have wanted to. Put differently, these challenges forced journalists to develop strategies to maintain their autonomy, or to renegotiate its precise meaning. While this particular case may have thus put too strong an emphasis on these divergences – in contrast to the communalities in journalists' practices in covering Syria - it nevertheless allowed us to explore the thesis that journalists' strategies can be understood by examining the volume and nature of their economic, social and cultural capital. Of course, the strength and width of this argument depends on its use for understanding cases with an altogether different profile. While it could be expected, for instance, that the explanatory power of Bourdieu's framework is weaker for less extraordinarily challenging situations, it may nevertheless be useful to improve our general understanding of, for example, diverging practices between citizen journalists and old-school professionals, or between format-specialists and topic-specialists.

Some of the findings presented in this article may have hardly surprised more well-read journalism scholars. To give one example, the fact that the size of media organisation's budgets for foreign news reporting, and their editorial self-identity has an impact on how their journalists go about covering a foreign conflict, seems all too obvious. The particular value of a Bourdieusian approach in this case, however, is that it helps to provide a more detailed perspective on precisely *how* these meso factors translate into concrete, everyday journalistic practices. When faced with the difficulty of gaining access to Syria, for instance, some media organisations chose to invest in a small number specialist desk workers, who might visit the scene a few times on separate occasions through different social groups, whereas others relied merely on generalists, or, in the opposite case, on one or even two permanent correspondents, each drawing on a social network within one of the armed forces involved in the conflict. To give another example, newspapers' position in the national field of competitors may have lead them to stimulate their reporters to opt for particular epistemological criteria in dealing with uncertain information, as well as the writing style associated with it. Hence some reporters were encouraged to build interpretational skills and to draw on a wide variety of sources – with differing degrees of reliability – whereas others were told to elaborate on phenomenological descriptions of what was going on, thereby shifting reporters' main function from interpreting to witnessing.

Some of the findings struck me as more original though. Perhaps most importantly, the distinction between endogenous and exogenous forms of cultural capital kept resurfacing in the analysis time and again. Obviously, journalists almost as a rule can rely on both forms of cultural capital. The key point, however, is that the particular volume and nature of the cultural capital journalists have acquired has a *qualitative* impact on their perceptions and experiences, and thus ultimately on their professional strategies as well. The reason that this impact has received such scant attention, I am inclined to suggest, lies in the difficulties of quantifying these subtle differences into more robust categories such as the type of education, or the all-round conception of what a being a good journalist is all about (e.g. the importance of the 'critical watchdog role'). While the particular volume and nature of cultural capital a journalist has acquired may be too subtle to have an overall impact on her role conception, it may prove to be decisive in determining how a reporter might deal with a particular situation as it emerges in front of him. As such, focussing on exogenous and endogenous forms of cultural capital, basically means drawing attention to how journalists' previous socialisation lingers on in their current

experiences and conceptions, which feeds into the strategies they use to tackle challenging situations, and which ultimately impacts how their stories are told.

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