"Journalism and the city: Redefining the spaces of foreign correspondence"

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JOURNALISM & THE CITY
Redefining the Spaces of Foreign Correspondence

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Place matters a great deal in journalism, even in the era of the 'death of geography.' Yet space never produces effects through its existence alone. To understand the relevance of location beyond its most immediate assigned role of 'logistic constraint' we must rework not only our understanding of journalism, but of the whole social world. This article presents a comparative analysis of foreign correspondents' practices in London and Oslo. The foreign journalists' experiences in the case studies are analytically dissected through the lens of Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT). The analysis shows the utility of the application of Latour's framework to the study of international journalism in two respects. First, by mapping how local practices—identities, newsgathering routines and story outputs—are relationally constructed through the interactions of social actors, technologies, and material infrastructures, ANT provides an understanding of the role of location that transcends the merely physical and geographical dimensions. Second, by showing how situated practices are the outcomes of unique network configurations, ANT questions the validity of any generalized one-size-fits-all statements about the current state of foreign correspondence.

Introduction

Although journalists live in a globally interconnected world where information and social contacts are available at the click of a mouse, location still matters. Particularly the newsgathering routines of foreign journalists—who often operate alone and with very limited budgets—are strongly shaped by the opportunities and constrains of the 'information environment' they operate in (Archetti 2012). The bottom line is that such environment, which not only spans virtual contacts, but also includes the spaces to meet sources, develop relationships, and to conduct hands-on research about a story, ultimately depends on the size of a town and its transport system. This is experienced to the extreme by foreign journalists who report from remote areas: in the words of a correspondent from the sub-Saharan Africa "logistics *is* the job."[1]

The interrelations between space (whether urban or not), communication technologies ('media') and newsmaking have long been recognized (Lindner 1996; McQuire 2008; Rodgers et al. 2008). The fact that journalistic practices are always *situated* is emphasized by ethnographic studies (see: Hannerz 2004 for a study of correspondents worldwide; Rodgers 2013 for an analysis of local practices). Journalists, indeed, contribute to constructing places: from shaping global audiences' perceptions and knowledge about foreign countries (Archetti 2011); to affecting our sense of proximity to the distant "other"

(Chouliaraki 2006; Wright 2011). Kate Wright (2013) suggests that even journalistic content might be reconceptualised through its relationship to location. As she writes, journalistic accuracy involves "explaining what the range of meanings relating to particular geographic places are, exploring the validity of those meanings" (ibid., 7). Additionally journalists operate within the context of ever more frequent and denser exchanges enabled by the internet and social media. Beyond the literature on how globalization changes the nature of space (Sassen 1999), a new attention towards the way technologies contribute to renegotiating relationships and identities through real time sharing of information across distance— mobility in communication—is reflected by the recent establishment of the journal *Mobile Media and Communication*.

These literature strands deal with different meanings, roles, and effects of location, each of them 'bracketing' place—in its relationship to 'media,' for instance, or 'journalism' or 'globalization' only—for their own specific purposes. Location's relevance in other domains is temporarily suspended for the analysis's sake. Yet location matters simultaneously across all of them. The question the study engages with is thus: How to conceptualize the multiple and simultaneous roles of location in international journalism? Where does space fit in foreign correspondence in an era of increasing interconnectedness?

Method

The case studies of the UK and Norway enable exploring the relevance of location along a range of dimensions. London and Oslo allow comparing the impact that different urban spaces have on the journalistic practices—identities of journalists, newsgathering routines, journalistic outputs—of foreign journalists across countries with different journalistic cultures, urban size and layouts, and formal mechanisms of support for foreign journalists.[2] The two case studies also offer the possibility of exploring journalistic routines in different information environments (Bromley n.d; Østbye n.d), as well as centres differently located in the (old-fashioned, in the perspective of ANT, as we will see in a moment) global geography of power—London, former capital of a colonial empire and world player fitting the idea of the traditional "core"; Oslo, a country that, despite having its own constitution since 1814, has achieved full independence from Sweden only in 1905 and regional Northern European player closer to the "periphery."

The study involved 11 interviews with foreign correspondents in London and Oslo, including the director of the Foreign Press Association (FPA) in London.[3] A 'foreign correspondent' in this study was any journalist working for a media outlet producing news (both hard news and features) for a foreign audience, regardless of whether this audience was in the country or abroad.

Actor Network Theory (ANT), a theoretical framework developed by Bruno Latour (2005), was used both as an ontology for the study and as a method. For Latour social reality is constituted by networks of human actors and objects. Objects, such as infrastructures, material places, technologies like the phone or the internet, and ideas (or a news story), are called "actants" to signify that they, too, have agency. In fact, far from being merely 'used' by human actors, they 'make a difference': "hitting a nail with and without hammer, boiling water with and without a kettle, fetching provisions with or without a basket" (Latour 2005: 71) do make a difference, which makes the hammer, kettle, and basket—or an office in the centre of London, a desk with a telephone, or a satellite phone—participants in the course of action. They are thus able to transform the identities of the actors involved: a journalist with a camera is not the same as one without, just as a camera is the hand of a journalist is not the same as a camera inside a pocket.

Methodologically Latour encourages the researcher to 'follow the network': to map connections and interactions among agencies, both human and non-human. His project is aimed at gaining greater 'objectivity' in science. When he writes that "networks are a great way to get rid of phantoms such as nature, society, or power" (Latour 2010, 8-9), he refers to

Social Science's tendency to create abstract concepts that do not really exist. Globalization, to mention one of such abstractions, in his view, is local at all points: "try, as an exercise, to locate the places, the theatres, the stages where 'globalization' is being painted over. You will soon realize that, in spite of so much 'globalonney,' globalization circulates along minuscule rails resulting in some glorified form of provincialism" (Latour 2005, 190). As he continues: "Whenever anyone speaks of a 'system,' a 'global feature,' a 'structure,' a 'society,' and 'empire,' a 'world economy,' and 'organization,' the first ANT reflex should be to ask: 'In which building? In which bureau? Through which corridor is it accessible? Which colleagues has it been read to? How has it been compiled?'" (ibid., 183).

Not only this mapping exercise sensitizes us to the essential and inescapable role of place and location in social action. Indeed, as I will show in the next section, the mapping of foreign correspondent's networked practices in London and Oslo—which involves the tracing of the way agencies also have effects at a distance—reveals a much more layered and complex reality of journalism in the 21st century than one would gain from simply describing journalistic routines across two different locations. Here lies also the potential for developing an understanding of foreign correspondence that does not rely on the usual generalized dichotomies of core/periphery, foreign/national, global/local.

Findings

Approaching journalism as a network of micro situated practices, which can have connections much further than the physical place in which they are located, enables the researcher to more deeply understand how the identity of the correspondents are constituted, what shapes their routines and their news outputs. Indeed, as researchers, we can gain more 'objectivity' in the sense that we can obtain a picture of international journalism drawn by the real-world connections themselves, not by our evaluation of how well the (presumed) present state of foreign correspondence fits our pre-packaged (and perhaps outdated) definition of what 'good foreign correspondence' should be like.

The way journalists, technologies and places are connected through constellations of relationships around the London and Oslo centres (themselves actor-networks) is illustrated by taking three steps through which, according to Latour, "the Social"—the practices of foreign correspondence in this case—can be broken down and "reassembled": "localizing the global"; "redistributing the local"; "connecting sites." I will discuss each step in turn.

Localizing the Global

"Where are the structural effects actually being produced?" (Latour 2005, 175).
The debate about the impact of advances in communication technologies on journalism, particularly the widespread notion that information gathered through the internet and social media is replacing first-hand research (Atkins 2011, for instance), as the following discussion will illustrate, could be put into perspective by examining the evidence of daily journalistic practices across the virtual and material sites where they take place.

Not-So-Global Social Media Platforms

Although the internet and social media would appear to be available to all journalists virtually anywhere, which platforms (email, Twitter, Facebook, Sina Weibo, blogs…) are actually involved in newsgathering routines and, importantly, *why*, *how*, *to what extent* and *for which purposes* varies. The practical uses of social media, counterintuitively given their availability in the immaterial realm of cyberspace, are also shaped by location, particularly by the editorial needs of the news organization a journalist works for within a specific local

media environment. For Nishtha Chugh, for example, currently Online Desk Editor at the *Fair Observer* in London, social media plays a key role in finding new leads and exclusive angles, which she will then follow up with further research. Apart from keeping up to date with news from the *BBC*, *Al-Jazeera*, the *New York Times*, the *Economist* and regional media (also outside the UK), she follows Twitter and Facebook, even content on LinkedIn (groups often post articles) to get a sense of the reactions and comments by news consumers. The range of different outlets consulted and the use of these social media platforms is explained by her organization's editorial focus on providing analysis, particularly alternative perspectives. The pressure in finding exclusive leads is extreme in the London hub, from which a myriad of different views, even on the same topic, are already produced every day.

At the same time, local use (or lack of it) of new media is also strongly shaped by correspondents' understanding of what journalism is about. An example in this respect is provided by Tarek Mahmoud, Egyptian correspondent currently reporting, in Oslo, for *MENA* (Middle East News Agency). He has spent over 30 years in journalism and worked in a variety of locations, such as Cyprus, Jordan and Brussels among the rest and has a very different attitude to social media. While he also writes analysis and works under tight deadlines, he is very keen to stress that, working for a newsagency, no matter where, means to conduct "mining work"—in his words, bringing to the surface the "rough diamonds" that editors will further polish. In this activity, as he explains, one simply "cannot rely on social media" capturing snapshots: "we [correspondents] are not a camera, we are digging." As he elaborates through another metaphor, social media can be "manipulated," like a camera that by taking the picture of a person simply walking on a crime scene can make him or her look like the perpetrator: "The problem with social media is that you can accuse anyone of doing anything."

Geography and 'Good Correspondence'

'Foreign correspondence' and its output, 'foreign news,' are often talked about in general terms. A widespread idea is that foreign news, when it is not disappearing due to the lack of interest of domestic audiences, is becoming superficial: since more and more foreign bureaux are closing down, news becomes based to a greater extent on remote internet research that on face-to-face contact with sources (Constable 2007; Moore and Loyn 2010). The implication is that to 'improve' the reporting of foreign correspondents 'more access on the ground' is required. However, which kind of access supports 'good reporting' and where this should take place completely depends on correspondents' professional interests. As Christopher Wyld, director of the FPA in London points out, over the last few years there has been a "steady increase" in the number of Brazilian correspondents in the British capital.

They, however, tend not to be members of the FPA, despite the fact that the association's card (as confirmed by the experience of other correspondents) provides an advantage in getting access to official briefings and can make a difference in a competitive environment. As Wyld explains it: "It might be that the things that we do are not of interest to them [Brazilian journalists] particularly…They are not as interested in the royal family [among the establishment actors the FPA facilitates access to] as the Germans are or the Americans are […] It's a cultural thing."

As a further demonstration that physical presence 'on the ground' is not (at least at all times) a necessary condition to producing quality journalism is provided by the case of Lars Bevanger, Norwegian freelance journalist who works for the *BBC*, *Deutsche Welle*, *NRK* (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation), *Radio Netherlands*, *Radio Sweden International* among the rest. He tends to report for British audiences about education, welfare, parental leave and the 'Scandinavian model.' While he travels to Oslo three to four times a year to conduct in-depth research about his features, he is able to produce, through fiber-optic cable and his Norwegian mother tongue, most of his pieces from Manchester in the UK.

Redistributing the Local

"How is the local itself being generated? This time it is not the global that is going to be localized, it is the local that has to be re-dispatched and redistributed" (Latour 2005: 192).
This step of the analysis is about understanding how "each site becomes the result of the action at a distance of some other agency" (ibid., 219). In the case studies being examined the map of international relations has a crucial role. The widespread expectation is that world powers, by grabbing the headlines and shaping news agendas, determine the directions of news flows (Kim and Barnett 1996), leading to a distinction between "core" and "periphery." Indeed also in this study there are "core" and "periphery" in the sense that London is enmeshed in a greater amount of connections than Oslo. However, 'following the network' helps the researcher, to further use Latour's metaphorical language, "flattening out" these notions: in other words understanding exactly how and why something as distant as world politics ends up affecting practices apparently as microscopic as single individuals' choices, such as that of moving to a 59 degree North latitude town.

International Relations, Newsworthiness and Love

To get a grasp of the uneven development of networked connections around the two capitals one needs only to look at the way London was by the mid-nineteenth century a worldwide empire—a status it had achieved thanks to its monopoly and control of cable technology. As Daniel Headrick (1991, 24) writes, "by 1870 Great Britain was in direct communication with North America, Europe, the Middle East, and India. At a time when France, Germany, Russia and the United States were still filling in their domestic networks, Britain was ready to control the new medium of communication around the world."
Norway, by contrast, saw in 1865 the opening of the very first cable between Oslo (then called Kristiania) and Gothenburg, which enabled the exchange of news between Norway and the rest of Europe. Even then, however, for economic reasons, news was rarely sent directly from the last mainland European post (Copenhagen) directly to Oslo, but would be routed through Stockholm. In addition to this, because of the union with Sweden, which lasted until 1905, even if Norway had a separate parliament, foreign correspondents tended to live in the Swedish capital (Lindahl 2001, 3-4). It is therefore not clear when the first correspondents arrived in Norway, although it is reasonable to assume this happened only towards the end of the nineteenth century.
This very history, particularly the flows of people, goods and information that constitute it, has not only contributed over time to building the very physical structure and scope of the London and Oslo urban centres. It also explains the level of interest in the two hubs: their *newsworthiness*, in other words, is a network-based relational outcome. Both the interest in London from the myriad actors connected to it and the amount of reporters that concentrated in its centre as a result, make the British capital an extremely competitive environment: although today many young freelancers are autonomously operating from there "from their kitchen table," London is, together with Washington, one of the top destinations where established news organizations send their very best correspondents. In the words of London FPA's director Christopher Wyld, "London is one of the plum jobs." Oslo, on the other hand, has undergone a process of increasing internationalization, especially through its joining of NATO in 1949, the discovery of oil in the 1970s, the 1994 Lillehammer Olympics and, most recently, through the trial of Anders Breivik's who bombed Oslo city centre and shot 69 young political activists on the island of Utøya in summer 2011 (Lindahl 2001). Yet, as Björn Lindahl, Swedish correspondent currently reporting for *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Gotebörgs Posten* and *Arbeidsliv i Norden*, who has worked in Oslo for over 30 years (serving four times as Director of the Oslo FPA) explains, Oslo "[*jokingly*] does not have the 'best' news." The Norwegian capital, as he continues, is "far down" on the list of priority destinations where editors would like to place their correspondents—"even for

Swedish media." So much so that, as the experiences of the interviewees suggest, few choose Oslo as a career move. In fact, it appears that, apart from those who work for the newsgencies, almost nobody is ever *sent* there by their editors. Guorong Li, Chinese correspondent for newsagency Xinhua, who has been in journalism for over 20 years, enthusiastically accepted the offer from his editor in Beijing to become, together with a colleague (his wife) the first Xinhua reporter from Oslo. This was for him an opportunity to "start something new" and "challenging" in a new country. A survey of foreign correspondents in Oslo in 2000, however, found that 84% of the respondents had moved to Norway voluntarily, 81% of them for "personal reasons." As Lindahl most colourfully phrases a trend that still largely applies today: "it is more a question of someone meeting someone and falling in love, then coming to this country."

Connecting Sites

"[the third step to reassembling the Social is] to detect the type of connectors that make possible the transportation of agencies over great distance and to understand why they are so efficient" (Latour 2005, 221).

In this final section I am going to deal with the "connectors" and how they transform the identity of the actors they link together. The connectors in this case are not only communication technologies and physical meeting places, but also the knowledge that resides within the networks of contacts they contribute to establish both in London and Oslo. The value of the correspondent, in this respect, does not consist only in gathering information in a foreign place, but foremost in being able to access and navigate these networks.

Communication Technologies, Meeting Places and the Correspondent's Value

While communication technologies are essential to all journalists who have been interviewed, they appear relatively more important for correspondents in London, especially because, due to the size of the urban centre, travelling to events and to meet sources is time consuming. This is also the reason why the FPA in London is no longer offering a lounge with a press room. Christopher Wyld, director of the FPA, explains that:

> the number of people who actually used the Club regularly [Commonwealth Club, where the press room was located and which shut down in June 2013] where about half a dozen […] Most journalists are very busy, they live in the suburbs, they work from their kitchen tables, or […] from their offices, or they are out […] running about and covering stories. They do not hang about sort of sitting around as it might have been in the 19th century, even in the 1980s.

In fact, as demonstrated by the lack of interest from foreign correspondents for a press centre Number 10 Downing Street had set up for covering the G8 in Northern Ireland in June 2013 ("nobody came"), correspondents in London do not even need fixed physical locations to rely on. As Wyld continues: "This is the model […] people need a place to go to […] to get close to actual people, to hear from […] David Cameron or Nigel Farage […] but in terms of work they need wi-fi, a good laptop, and broadband. They don't need a press centre."
Several Norwegian correspondents might appear comparatively advantaged in newsgathering terms by the fact that Oslo centre is relatively more compact. Especially if a correspondent is reporting about politics and foreign policy, it could appear possible to move within a walking distance of about 300 square meters (Lindahl). On the other hand newsagency correspondents are still under deadline pressures. Saleha Mohsin, currently reporting mostly about finance and politics for *Bloomberg*, for example, says that if it takes

longer than 10 minutes to walk she will use a cab. Having said that, transport might be a problem, due to its high costs, for freelancers— Tarek Mahmoud, working for MENA newsagency but formally a freelancer, describes the very thought of paying €300 from his own pocket to reach a location 20Km outside the city centre for a press briefing as "crazy."

In this context in which journalists tend to operate in relatively closer proximity to the city centre, the spaces provided by the FPA in Oslo (NIPS, *Norges internasjonale pressesenter*) are more relevant to the correspondents' routines. Most full-time correspondents (at least 15-16 according to both Lindahl and Bevanger) actually use either private or shared offices that can be rented, beyond the first three free months, for about $100 a month (shared), a very reasonable fee by Norwegian price standards. The centre also has phones, wi-fi and broadband. The very fact of being in the office has further effects on the journalistic outputs of the correspondents. Lars Bevanger describes collaboration in NIPS as: "bouncing ideas off each other […] telling stories to each other." This is particularly facilitated, as several Oslo correspondents pointed out, by the fact that there are few correspondents and they all work for different media outlets, so there is no direct competition. Björn Lindhal, among other interviewees, talks in this respect about the unique "collaborative atmosphere," which is not present in other FPAs in the Nordic countries.

In different proportions in London and Oslo, communication technologies and physical environments thus contribute to create networks of information and knowledge. Being part of these constellations of contacts is what makes foreign correspondents valuable. As Wyld phrases it: "in an age of perpetual noise, and in the age of the internet where 99% of the stuff on the internet is rubbish, amateur, unfounded, and rumour, and slander, the need for professionally trained responsible journalism around the world has never been greater […] there is an enormous […] demand for intelligent information." As several interviewees have pointed out, the added value of the foreign correspondent does not only consist in *explaining* what happens in a foreign country—to "see deeper and further than the other guys" (Guorong Li). In an increasingly competitive market that values timely information and analysis, it is also being able to access a network of trusted sources, "people to call on at very short notice" (Bevanger). A correspondent from Stavanger (location about 400Km West of Oslo) further elaborated on this by describing how, when he travelled from Sweden (where he was at the time) to Oslo in the aftermath of the Breivik shootings, he arrived after reporters despatched from the London newsdesk had already arrived. Yet, thanks to his little knowledge of Norwegian was able to access local sources: "in quite a difficult time for the nation I was able to at least make approaches to people […] in their own language."

Conclusions

This article has suggested that foreign correspondence does not consist in sending information, stories or reports, as well-researched as they might be, from a foreign place to a home country—what Tarek Mahmoud calls being a "postman." Journalism is not just a set of techniques, but a range of "star-shaped" (to use Latour's terminology) networked situated practices that involve complex connections among humans, technologies and places. Actor network analysis offers the method and theoretical scaffolding to investigate these practices. To map the connections and the influences that go from the global to the local without slipping into generalization and abstract notions (and, as such, potentially analytically sterile) and concepts (like globalization, the generalised impact of the internet or the economic crisis on journalism…) provides a useful starting point for researching foreign correspondence in an age of increasing interconnectedness, complexity and transformation.

Journalism is ultimately not only a product of the number of journalists 'on the ground,' of the existence of foreign bureaux, or of the amount of financial resources only. The correspondents' reports are not better or worse depending on the number of words that have been written or how long a correspondent has spent surfing the internet rather than

talking face-to-face to sources, or in the hall of Parliament rather than sitting in a café in front of a laptop. Current negative evaluations of the health state of foreign correspondence, including the notion that it might be terminally ill (see Hamilton 2009, 463), are the result of the generalized, global while at the same time un-situated criteria we have used to assess it. By adopting a view of journalism that is more aware of the connections between people, places and technologies, we can perhaps develop a different diagnosis.

NOTES

1. Interview with Paulo Nuno Vicente, researching on the socio-demographics, professional culture, and newswork of foreign correspondents working across the sub-Saharan Africa.
2. London's urban population is 9,787,000; Oslo has 951,581 inhabitants. The capitals cover, respectively, an urban area of 1,737.9 km^2 and 289.84 km^2. The Foreign Press Association (FPA) in London counts about 500 members. The great majority of them are full-time journalists since, in order to qualify for membership 'a minimum of seventy-five per cent of accountable journalistic income must be derived from media abroad' (FPA 2013). Oslo's FPA, instead, has 88 members, of which about 35 are journalists who 'work every day' (Lindahl, interview). London is a hub within the North Atlantic or Liberal model of journalism while Oslo fits the North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The FPA in London was founded in 1888; Oslo's FPA a century later, in 1989.
3. Seven correspondents from Oslo; three foreign journalists in the UK in addition to an interview with Christopher Wyld, director of the London FPA. This data is complemented by 25 interviews with correspondents in the British capital from a previous study (Archetti 2012).

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