

The Vulture Club: International newsgathering via Facebook.

Abstract

Facebook is celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2014. Like its social media cousin, Twitter, Facebook has transformed how journalists gather and disseminate international news. On Facebook, freelance journalists work together in open and closed communities to share information about news production in the latest crisis news datelines. One such community is The Vulture Club. This 'secret' site is being used to garner resources that previously were only available to mainstream staff correspondents. The majority of the posts on this site are seeking advice on good fixers, visas, safety gear, hotels and contacts. This article uses content analysis to examine posts on the VC site. It concentrates in particular on requests by freelance journalists for help with finding fixers in different countries and will compare this model to a previous research study on staff correspondents and fixers. This article employs the theories of Pierre Bourdieu related to the acquisition of social and cultural capital.

Facebook versus Twitter

Facebook is celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2014. As the most high profile social networking site, it demonstrates the traits that Matthew Allan has outlined as being entirely in tune with the spirit of Web 2.0, namely that its users “create content as well as read it; and that access to and participation in this endeavour is part of a conversational approach to information circulation” (2013, p. 262). Facebook is being used by journalists as one of several social media “awareness systems” (Hermida, 2012, p. 660) for expanding the horizons of newsgathering. According to the BBC’s veteran foreign correspondent, Lyse Doucet: “There is no question, if you are not on Facebook or Twitter, you are not getting the full story” (quoted in Hahn, 2013, p. 7). However, in the last couple of years, Facebook appears to be ceding its ability to fuel news stories to the micro-blogging engine that is Twitter. For example, Simon Cottle showed how, during the ‘Tunisian Uprising’, bloggers collected material from Facebook posts and then translated them from Arabic into English and passed them on to Twitter for dissemination to mainstream journalists (2011, p. 652). With its hashtags and 140 characters, Twitter is used by journalists who are focused on building evolving news stories, put together by public contributions variously called “commons-based peer production” (Benkler and Nissenbaum, p. 2006), “collective intelligence” (Malone et al., 2009, p. 2), “produsage” (Bruns, 2008) or, “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010, p. 298). On Twitter the focus of news constantly shifts each time it is updated and depending on who is contributing. For journalists, Twitter moves fast and is a loud and lively forum for showcasing news updates and short, focused bursts of information, designed to clarify and further the purpose of news dissemination. By contrast, Facebook has been more about ‘sharing’ information and this is sometimes confined to small groups of like-minded individuals or people connected through work or place. According to a Pew Research Study (2014, p. 1), “Facebook reaches far more Americans than any other social media site” and “three in ten adults get at least some news while on Facebook”. Channel 4’s Anne Doble (quoted in Hahn 2013, p. 13) explains the difference between Twitter and Facebook in terms of journalism: “On Facebook you discuss an issue; you can ask specific questions. Twitter is more for exploring news”. This research paper will examine how

a specific tribe of journalists – freelance foreign correspondents - uses a Facebook site as a private platform for sharing newsgathering information. It will analyse the range of resources available on the site, and more particularly it will examine how members go about sourcing local ‘fixers’ in countries that they will be visiting to gather news. The objective is to discover if this social media site helps to level the playing field for freelancers in the newsgathering game.

The Vulture Club

The Vulture Club (VC) is one of a handful of Facebook (FB) groups dedicated to foreign correspondents and aid agency workers. For example, there are also the following open and closed groups: ‘Reporting Unlimited’ (open), ‘Dateline Jerusalem’ (closed), ‘Moscow Hack Pack’ (closed), ‘Connoisseurs of Third World Shitholes’ (closed), Lightstalkers (open) or ‘NVC’ (closed). The VC was begun by a human rights lawyer working for an NGO, following the death of two international photographers in Libya in 2011. NGOs have traditionally worked closely with journalists, as Simon Cottle and David Nolan point out (2007, p. 863): “Journalism serves as a bridge linking aid agencies and the work that they do in the field, with publics and potential donors”. And, due to their work, NGOs are acutely aware of the danger of working in some of these places. The VC name riffs on an insult that is sometimes hurled at foreign correspondents - that they are like ‘vultures’ at scenes of tragedy. In the ‘about’ section of the forum, the VC states (2013):

We are a close brotherhood, those who work in and report on warzones. And we like to look out for each other's safety and lend a helping hand [...] *The Vulture Club* aims to build a non-competitive community of war reporters, photographers, human rights activists, and humanitarian workers who wish to share information, and look for assistance on a particular issue--whether it is a request for contacts in the next place you are going, or an emergency evacuation.

I approached the administrator of the site in 2012 asking to join the group. I explained that I had been a news editor and journalist in several international media

organisations and had many FB friends and colleagues on the site. I heard back that I was accepted a few days later. Not long after the VC was created it became a 'closed group' where you had to apply to one of the administrators if you wanted to join. The members' names were visible to non-members of the group via Facebook but the posts were not. On 31 March 2013 (after this research was begun) one of the VC administrators began a discussion on the site saying FB was offering a one-off opportunity to take groups to 'secret' in privacy terms. With a 'secret' site, neither the site itself nor the members can be seen by outsiders. After a short debate it was decided that, on balance, this was a good idea if it made it more difficult for unfriendly authorities to see the names of members on the site. However, in the message stream there were people arguing that hacking a FB site would not be difficult, and that with more than 3,000 members at the time, the VC could never be guaranteed privacy. The administrator then sent an email to members saying he had changed the privacy status of the group 'from Closed to Secret' (VC Administrator email: 23 April 2013). This meant that if you were not a member you could no longer see the group's presence on FB, nor could you discover who was in the group. The obvious fallacies regarding this kind of privacy status were made evident on 22 May 2013 when a member took screen shots of a conversation about a newly published Israeli report being treated with alleged derision by some VC members. The Israeli press and dozens of blogs re-published the screen shots and covered the story with damning headlines. The International Business Times wrote: "Israel has reacted furiously after a group of foreign correspondents and human rights lawyers used a secret Facebook forum to pour scorn on a government report that cleared Israeli armed forces of blame in the killing of a Palestinian boy" (Moon, 2013). Members were thereby reminded that people who post on this type of site must understand that there are no guarantees that conversations will not become public. Nonetheless, for this project, all discussed posts and members' names will be kept anonymous.

The VC site is an active one, particularly in the European and Middle East daytime hours. As we shall see from the data below, the most active members are freelance reporters and photographers who keep up regular conversations with each other and with the small group of administrators who furnish information and exercise a benign authority over discourse that gets too argumentative. According to a

freelance member who wrote about the site in the Independent newspaper (Rainey: 2013), the club is an important “available resource” that young journalists should be made aware of, as a form of “freelancer’s kit”. On the site, young reporters often ask for advice from more seasoned reporters and are helped and sometimes admonished for transgressions, such as taking unnecessary risks in warzones.

Freelancers versus staffers

The site is evidence of a continuum in international newsgathering, where we can see recurring examples of journalists freelancing in conflict zones in order to parlay their experience into more permanent work with media organisations. Many well-known foreign and war correspondents earned their spurs this way. Mark Pedelty (2005, p. 69) wrote about this route into staff positions in his seminal work on foreign correspondents in El Salvador during the civil war in the 1980s. Pedelty deconstructed the reporting hierarchy into three separate groups – from the powerful staffers (‘A team’), to the Western stringers and freelancers (‘B team’) and down to the largely disenfranchised local journalists. Pedelty dissected the elite status of the staffers, who showed evidence of high levels of what Pierre Bourdieu termed “cultural capital” (1985) as instanced by their autonomy, their titles, their companies, their salaries and their resources. The ‘B team’ members on the other hand, had far less cultural capital and had to hustle and live on their wits, needing occasionally to work for the staffers in order to fund their own newsgathering. The local journalists were badly paid, had poor access to the main players in the war and often also worked for the staffers in order to augment their pay. The difference between the 1980s and now is that the number of freelancers heading to “already saturated warzones” (Williams, 2013) has increased exponentially.

The arena of competition just described is what Pierre Bourdieu called a “field” of activity (or a “social space”), which he interpreted as an area of contest, where players employ or trade their available skills to improve their respective positions (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 145). Players do this by building their stock of cultural “capital”, i.e. “the specific *capital* unique to that field” (Benson, 1999, p. 464). To be successful in a field of contest a player needs to build up three types of cultural capital:

“embodied” capital, centred on the person and gained through years of experience on the job; “objectified” capital, through authoring successful media outputs; and “institutionalised” capital through garnering prizes, credentialed by external markers (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 46-50). In international newsgathering, correspondents land in conflict zones at short notice and have to be immediately competitive in the ‘field’ of contest. As Colleen Murrell has demonstrated (2011, p. 268), the international newsgathering carried out by television foreign correspondents is almost entirely the product of a shared partnership between these journalists and local fixers whom they hire to help them with contacts, translation, story ideas and various forms of logistical and editorial aid. In order to be competitive, freelance correspondents also need to access these kinds of useful resources and track down fixers, and to do this, they are using their *social* capital of extended networks, as they do not have the corporate backing of wealthy media organisations. Instead, their networks are now available on websites such as the VC. ‘Social capital’ is a benefit derived from interacting with one’s peers (Bourdieu, *ibid*). Nan Lin describes this as, “an investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace” (2001, p. 19). According to Jessica Vitak and Nicole Ellison it has two purposes:

Social capital is typically divided into two categories: *bonding* social capital, which describes various types of physical, social and emotional support that individuals may provide to a network member and *bridging* social capital, which includes the information-based resources that can be derived from diverse heterogeneous networks (Vitak et al., p. 245).

Given these explanations, the VC site most closely equals “bridging social capital” as it arises among “loosely connected individuals” (Vitak et al., p. 246) for the purposes of “information based needs” (*ibid*. p. 247).

Fixers

As shall be revealed in the data below, a lot of the traffic on the VC site concerns freelancers searching for local fixers with whom to work in countries in crisis. Fixers essentially are local producers who are employed by foreign correspondents

(often on an ad hoc basis) for short bursts of logistical *and* editorial work during trips to a particular country. Most scholars of foreign news have tended to overlook or underplay the role of fixers in international newsgathering. The scholars who have written about fixers have acknowledged their helping or assisting roles but have not seen them as initiating stories or having key editorial roles in driving coverage. Mark Pedelty dismissed them as “logistical aides” (1995, p. 54). Ulf Hannerz called fixers “local helpers” (2000, p. 152) and said their assistance “tends not to be acknowledged” (2000, p. 154). Emily Erickson and John Maxwell Hamilton explained fixers’ support of peripatetic reporters through briefings, translation and arranging interviews and transport (2006, p. 41). Howard Tumber and Frank Webster found reporters who thought that the employment of a good fixer made “the difference between successful and unsuccessful coverage” (2006, p. 106). And Jerry Palmer and Victoria Fontan (2007) chronicled their use as translators in the 2003 Iraq War.

In a previous research project Murrell¹ showed that foreign correspondents (working for mainstream TV stations in the UK and Australia), always used fixers except in very rare circumstances (2009). The project also demonstrated that fixers often initiated coverage (2009 & 2010) and could be highly influential in how stories were tackled. The staff correspondents interviewed revealed that they would mostly rely on corporate databases or closed networks in order to find suitable, experienced fixers, in preference to finding them on the ground, at the last minute. If they could not source fixers in advance, then they would rely on recommendations from colleagues at other, similar media organisations. The “prestige of the foreign correspondent’s job” (Tunstall, 1971: 35) has been well documented. It reflects how some parts of the journalistic workforce are more elite than others (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 69). The elite TV foreign correspondents from Murrell’s research project (like Pedelty’s ‘A Team’ in 1985) preferred to take advice from people who held similar jobs titles and experience. These reporters did not need social network groups to get this information as they could just call or email each other, without having to arrange access through a third party. With the growing use of social media, freelancers now

¹ See Notes at end of article

have the tools to do this too. By turning to other VC members, they are touching base with a large group of people, many of whom they will never meet. However loose are these ties, they nonetheless represent a network of like-minded individuals from across the globe with similar aspirations. As Andrew Marr notes: “More than any other group of journalists, foreign correspondents have a family tree of heroes and heroines, and a sense that they are a tribe, albeit a scattered and dysfunctional one” (2004, p. 327).

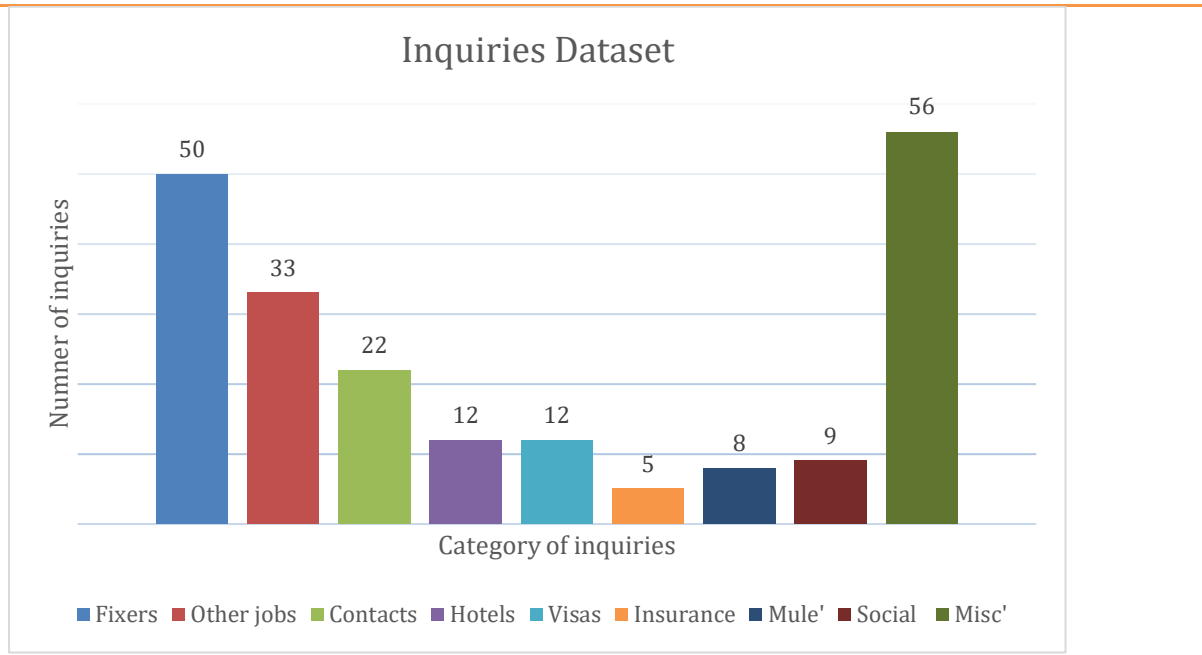
Methodology

This study uses Pierre Bourdieu’s theories related to social and cultural capital to test the hypothesis that online social networking can help in international newsgathering by leveling the ground for freelancers through the proffering of information on fixers, visas, border crossings and country-by-country security reports. This project uses quantitative research analysis to investigate the numbers of posts on the site relating to certain themes (see below). It also employs a qualitative approach by separately examining Syria as a case study for newsgathering in warzones. The month chosen for gathering data was from Sunday 26 February to Saturday 25 March 2013. At this time there were 3,362 members of the VC, of whom 162 were classified as ‘new’. The data were broken down initially into two areas – (A) An ‘*offers dataset*’ which gathered together the specific information being offered to other members on the site and (B) an ‘*inquiries dataset*’ which held the information being asked for by members of the VC. Dataset (A) was first examined to find out the kinds of information or commodities being *offered* (information, advertising and advocacy). Dataset (B) was examined to uncover the kinds of information and commodities being *requested* (fixers, other jobs, contacts, hotels, visas, insurance, ‘mule,’ social and miscellaneous). A further mapping of dataset (B) was then carried out from the subset ‘fixers’. This was done to ascertain the roles of the members (staff or freelancers, journalists or photographers) who were asking for the information about fixers, the countries that they came from, the countries that they were going to, and whether or not they received replies on the site. A case study was then conducted of qualitative data from

dataset (A) – regarding the offering of specific information about newsgathering in Syria and the role of fixers. Finally, the data from this research project - concerning the *freelance* search for fixers - was then compared to a previous research project by Murrell (2011), which examined how elite, *staff journalists* searched for fixers. This earlier project involved qualitative interviewing of 20 TV foreign correspondents from Australia and the UK and five fixers from countries in crisis.

Findings – Offers Dataset

The information from the *offers* dataset was broken into three subsets; these were labeled: (A) ‘Information/help’; (B) ‘Advertising’; and (C) ‘Advocacy/See this’. ‘*Information/Help*’ had 69 distinct message streams over the month of monitoring. They were concerned mostly with the latest safety or ‘in-country’ advice being issued by NGOs, such as the International News Safety Institute (INSI) or governments. The information offers were sometimes from the VC administrators and sometimes from other people who were aware of the latest guidelines for use by people about to enter a particular country. For example, these posts contained up-to-date information about visa requirements for Syria and Libya. The second subset ‘*Advertising*’ had 51 distinct message streams. These concerned offers of paid and unpaid work. Some posts advertised hostile environment courses or products for sale - such as safety vests, trauma packs or satellite phones. There were also five examples of fixers advertising their own services – from Gaza, Kenya, Egypt and Venezuela. These were along the line of: “Kenyan elections – available as reporter and fixer”. The third category ‘*Advocacy/See this*’ had 172 distinct message streams. These posts largely asked readers to click links to uploaded stories on the site or on other websites. Here, Arab journalists and media workers drew attention to the alleged suffering and atrocities across the Middle East, but mostly in Syria and Palestine. Another set of posts showed journalists and photographers calling on people to look at their online work (this category was close to ‘advertising’). Other posts were more akin to, “OMG – look at this!” or they told people “this article is worth a read”.



Findings – Inquiries dataset

The inquiries dataset concerned the members who were *asking* others for help, information or services. These questions were split [see above table] into the following 9 categories: a) 'Fixers'; b) 'Other jobs'; c) 'Contacts'; d) 'Hotels'; e) 'Visas'; f) 'Insurance'; g) 'Mule'; h) 'Social'; and i) 'Miscellaneous'. The first subset 'Fixers' had 50 distinct message streams and these will be discussed in more detail below. The second subset 'Other Jobs' had 33 distinct message streams. These questions either asked directly for commissions or asked if anybody was interested in various job vacancies, which were mostly temporary commissions in countries such as Nigeria, Venezuela or Egypt. The subset 'Contacts' (22 message streams) bypassed the use of fixers and asked directly for contacts in particular governments, NGOs or media outlets. Nonetheless, further down the message streams some of these 'Contacts' queries later morphed into questions about fixers. The subset 'Hotels' (12 message streams) called for recommendations for efficient, safe, cheap and/or well-located hotels or houses for rent in various datelines. These message streams generally attracted a lot of interaction. For example one post calling for a recommendation for a '\$50 a night hotel/guesthouse in Cairo' attracted 42 reply posts. There was lively and sometimes contradictory advice given in the subset 'Visas', which had 12 separate

message streams. Here people exchanged information about different countries' requirements and how long it took from various cities to get visas to difficult countries such as Iran and Pakistan. The subset 'Insurance' (5 message streams) consisted of requests for information regarding cheap and reliable insurance for personal health and equipment. A surprising category was one given the title 'Mule', as this was the word the members used as a verb in this context. This category had 8 distinct message streams and in these posts people in particular countries asked for any incoming VC members to bring them particular goods they needed – from toothpaste to “small pieces of gear”. The 'Social' subset (9 message streams) involved people searching for company, largely through the quaintly termed “international call for beer”. Here people in countries such as Egypt would signal they were in a certain location if anyone wanted to join them for a drink. Sometimes a request included a call to “mango juice” – which could either mean a genuinely alcohol-free evening or it could be a euphemism for consuming beer. And subset 9 'Miscellaneous' (56 distinct messages) involved a wide range of requests such as: help with working Inmarsat telephones, advice on how to “clean” one's internet presence, recommendations for a photo laboratory in Bangkok or help with ongoing editorial research or work.

The data from the first subset of queries above ('Fixers') was then further broken down in order to understand more about the requests for local help. These 50 posts were examined to extract the following information about the questioner and the fixer they were after. These subsets were:

- 1) Staff job holder
- 2) Freelancer
- 3) Job area (journalist, photographer or NGO worker)
- 4) Country of origin of request
- 5) Country inquiring about
- 6) Did request get a reply?

Data on 1, 2 and 3

Triangulating the information available from Facebook profiles, Twitter profiles or via Google, the results show that of the 50 people seeking information on

fixers, only 13 (26%) clearly could be categorized as having staff jobs; three were hard to determine (6%); which left 34 freelancers making inquiries (68%). The job titles of the members asking questions show that 48% described themselves as journalists/writers; 28% described themselves as photographers; with a further 12% in the hybrid category of photojournalists. This means that 88% of those asking questions about fixers on this site were people involved in activities connected directly to newsgathering. The rest identified as film or documentary makers (4%); NGO workers (4%); an embassy worker (2%) and 'army videographer' (2%).

Data on category 4

The data revealed that the people asking the questions were located far and wide. Sometimes they had identifier locations on their posts and sometimes they mentioned where they were. Otherwise, they were located via internet searches in the same manner as above. The countries from where most of the inquiries were launched were: USA (22%); UK (14%); Lebanon (14%) and France (12%). After that the countries of origin were ranked: Egypt (8%); Italy (6%); Turkey (4%); Netherlands (4%); Germany (4%); Libya (4%); plus Algeria (2%); Afghanistan (2%); Canada (2%); and Jordan (2%). Most of the inquiries from people residing in the Middle East were for fixers in destinations that were also in the Middle East.

Data on category 5

Of the countries where fixers were being sought out, most destinations were in the Middle East (stretching over as far as Pakistan and Afghanistan). Direct inquiries for fixers in these countries accounted for 56% of all posts: Libya (12%); Iraq (8%); Qatar (6%); Egypt (6%); Yemen (4%); Pakistan (4%); Tunisia (4%); Turkey (2%); Gaza (2%); Israel (2%); Algeria (2%); Afghanistan (2%) and Lebanon (2%). Freelancers seeking to cover elections and politics accounted for Burma (6%); India (6%); Kenya (4%) Venezuela (4%) and USA (2%). There were one-off requests for fixers in the following countries: Romania, Poland, Sri Lanka, Brazil, China, DR Congo, Japan, Bosnia, Mexico, Belarus, and Mali. These requests were often both general and simple, for example: "Hey – I am looking for a fixer in Romania for a trip in April". Sometimes they are more detailed, such as: "I was looking for the contact of a reliable fixer in Sri

Lanka; someone who has access to both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. No need for high up political connections”. And sometimes they were extremely specific: “Hello, I am looking for a very good fixer in Mali to go to Syama near Sikasso for a story about gold mines. URGENT... Thanks”. Money is a significant issue among freelancers and there were a number of posts with requests such as: “I am looking for a cheap and nice fixer (less than 60 \$/day) in Belarus. Someone who can also translate in French or English”. Some requests asked for hybrid roles – such as fixers with cars, or fixers who could also shoot video.

Data on category 6

60% of people posting requests for fixers received clear replies via this site. These replies included people saying “I’m available” or providing the name of a fixer they knew or of a company (such as Kabul Pressistan or journalistpal.wix.com in Gaza) where fixers could be found. Names are traded openly, even regarding countries where there were obvious dangers – such as Iraq, Pakistan or Algeria. Amongst the 40% who did not receive an open reply on the site, 10% may well have received an answer as they asked for ‘DMs’ (direct messages) or PMs (private messages) or for people to email them and they provided an email address.

A case study regarding Syria

Looking at the data from a purely quantitative perspective (regarding message streams) does not give the whole picture regarding the use of fixers in conflict zones. For example, there were no direct inquiries during this month in 2013 asking for names of fixers in Syria, even though there was a large-scale civil war going on. However, this does not mean that the issue was not canvassed, far from it. It was simply that it was canvassed in message streams that began as simple information *offerings* but ended up in detailed conversations about border requirements to enter Syria being tied up with the employment of local fixers. There were three message streams about Syria. The first two were begun by a disgruntled Syrian “media worker”, passing on complaints from “activists” who were annoyed at freelancers, whom he called “adventurers”, who were allegedly putting other people’s lives at risk. He wrote that too many “young guys keep going to Syria as freelance journalists” and that, as

the situation was becoming “more serious”, it was likely that “action will be taken and will not allow [sic] them to enter Syria”. This post sparked a controversy about *who* exactly had the right to stop freelance journalists from entering a country and *who* could decree who had experience or not. In the end, 29 replies were generated. One journalist wrote: “I just have a sinking feeling this impulse amongst (no doubt well-intentioned) Syrian fixers/media officers, derives, on the face of it, from conversations here”. He added: “Even if these guys are the good guys, it’s a slippery and faintly ludicrous slope handing the process of journalist risk assessment to one side in a bitter civil war”. This message stream was later removed from the site. The same initiator continued in another post, saying he had met a young journalist whom he thought was 20 years old, who had a “small camera” and said he was a freelancer. He asked if he had a moral duty to save somebody like this if he were foolish enough to go somewhere dangerous, like Aleppo. Again, members started arguing (across 16 replies) that the size of a camera should not rule out that serious and responsible journalism was being conducted. At the same time, a VC administrator uploaded a document called a ‘Safety checklist and info sheet – Syria March 2013’. This document was later put on Google Docs and a link to it was put out on Twitter. The administrator wrote:

Due to a number of recent incidents concerning visitors to Syria who have got themselves and those helping them into trouble, some members of VC and some local Syrian fixers have been talking. There are two new schemes going to come into place on the Turkish border, one run by Syrians and local fixers and one run by some of us.

Among the measures being proposed (by local fixers who were in some way connected to the Turkish-Syrian border crossing), were that journalists would have to turn up with an accreditation letter from a media outlet and that they would have to sign off a sheet asking for “a name, date of birth, nationality, signature, and the signature of a local fixer who has spoken to the journalist in question” in advance. The second scheme (run by the VC) involved making the information safety sheet available in border hotels etc. as a “reminder to those who may not have thought about local

contacts and so forth". The sheet said: "You will need a trusted fixer/translator and driver. If you run into problems, they will be your lifeline. You should not go into Syria without trusted contacts, including a fixer". And finally, the administrator also informed members about a "small email admin" which would be run by VC journalists who had recently been in Syria, where people could exchange detailed information safely. The information on the VC site was clearly aimed at freelancers, with one of the administrators saying to another that the safety sheet information was vital to "hundreds of vulnerable freelancers". The safety sheet also outlined what journalists should take into Syria, including: "body armour with level IV protection and a full medpack as a minimum". In the reply stream, a journalist who intended to go to Syria shortly, asked the administrators to send him a list of "trustable fixers".

Discussion of findings

The data from this research study show that freelance journalists can access vital information necessary for success in the 'journalistic field' by gathering together and networking to generate the resources that they need. This networked social capital equips them to be competitive players in the field of contest. Via the VC site freelancers can find commissions, book cheap flights (with discounts for journalists), select hotels near Tahrir Square, hire fixers, acquire insurance, contact government spokespeople and get their cameras mended. Through the large number of requests for fixers in different countries and the importance accorded to fixers in coverage of the Syrian conflict, one can assert that fixers are valued as an important resource for international newsgathering. This acknowledged importance of hiring fixers mirrors the findings of research carried out by Murrell (2009, p. 24) which demonstrated that all of the staff foreign correspondents interviewed always hired fixers, barring exceptional circumstances.

The data show that freelancers are relying on their own 'tribe' for information about fixers. In part this corresponds to Murrell's research (2013, p. 75), which showed that the staff TV correspondents preferred to find fixers from their own tried and trusted networks. The latter's first option was their company's database of available fixers, and when this did not turn up somebody, then they went to journalists from

other organisations that were similar to their own. On the whole, these TV correspondents preferred to keep these contacts close, especially if they were good. In contrast, the sheer size of the VC means that members are very likely to be asking a stranger for this information. Names are exchanged and recommended and it is down to the individual to decide how much trust or credence to give to the recommendation. In the previous study, elite staffers also demonstrated preferences as to what *kind* of person they preferred to select as fixers. The majority of these correspondents (Murrell, 2011, p. 205) said that they preferred to employ local journalists, as these people best understood their needs. From this current research study (where people were not interviewed) it is not possible to discover if freelancers would prefer a local journalist as a fixer as the requests simply asked for 'fixers' from a particular area. Again, it is possible that these questions came up later in emails or direct messages between VC members, after the initial requests were made. There was also no indication if VC members sometimes sought out fixers at the last moment in situ in countries in crisis, as this is not the point of the website, which is about (limited) forward planning.

From the fixers' side, those from the previous project (2011, p. 177) mostly had to rely on word of mouth to make contact with the next incoming correspondent. If they were lucky, their names were held in media companies' databases for future use or they were put on retainers. In this present research, some fixers in the VC are advertising themselves or a number of fixers' organisations. For example, one click will get you from the VC to the Kabul Pressistan site, which advertises its services like this:

If you hire a fixer from Kabul Pressistan you'll also have the whole agency's team working for you, fixing your appointments, getting you access to Afghan government officials, experts and analysts, international diplomats, "ordinary people" and even insurgent spokesmen (2013, Kabul Pressistan website).

In terms of security, the VC site shows that freelancers seem happy to take on board the help they are offered and appear to be trusting of its provenance. A number of posts revealed that members were willing to take contacts for fixers in places where

it is dangerous to work – such as Iraq, Syria and Pakistan. In contrast, the elite staffers interviewed previously (Murrell, 2010) showed that people based in Baghdad took much more rigorous security measures to try to ensure that their fixers were trustworthy and that they helped each other to keep safe.

Money is an important issue when you do not have a staff job, and sometimes it intersects uncomfortably with safety issues. Some members appeared prepared to enter places like Iraq or Libya, making contact with a fixer via the VC but they were not evidently considering *separate* security cover. Others trusted on getting both security and contacts from the same fixer. Regarding Libya, one wrote: “I had a more or less English-speaking driver with a good car and a fixer/translator/security guy (he was all of those and none of them, really) for \$250 each”. While a second posted: “I pay \$100/day for fixer & driver (same person) in both Tripoli and Benghazi”. In previous research conducted into the BBC and CNN staffers based in Iraq (Murrell, 2010), none of the journalists were allowed to work without a complete recce of a filming location being conducted by fully trained and expensive security personnel. Nonetheless, staff journalists parachuting into sudden crisis situations, (who worked for companies with less money for newsgathering than others) frequently had to consider finances in the employment of fixers.

Alongside the search for fixers, the data reveal that the VC site provides a wide range of other important resources for success in the field of international journalism. Updates about security, visas, equipment, insurance and places to stay are all tailor-made, valuable pieces of information being given to members by people who understand their needs. For example, recommendations for cheap hotels cover places that are inevitably close to the news action. Adverts for “hostile environment courses” also provide you with similar training to that of staffers, if you can afford the discounted price. Following the discussions in the monitored period about safety issues, Syria and freelancers, (which continued into subsequent months on the site), members of the VC were instrumental in joining forces with another freelance group, the Frontline Club, to form the ‘Frontline Freelance Register’ (Greenslade: 2013). This

group put up a mission statement on a new, open page on Facebook (advertised on the VC), stating:

The first six months will see the FFR building a community of freelancers and establishing a voice for them and will work with journalist support organisations, industry and those with an interest in safety and security to support members and champion safety and professional practice. (Frontline Freelance Register).

This use of the collective social capital of freelancers is thereby being harnessed to pull in media organisations, which have not traditionally considered it their role to worry about the safety of reporters who are not on staff. This strengthened tie may eventually link freelancers more closely to the corporate and private networks of better-resourced, staff correspondents.

Conclusion

At present, the VC provides a freelancers' starter kit for a large pool of people who are now involved in crisis news coverage. The lobbying for improved safety for freelancers shows that the VC is beginning to convert its online social capital into causes in which it believes and from which members will receive benefit (Lin, 2001, op. cit.). The resources available on the site are useful and are constantly being built upon by an active membership which has grown by over a thousand members in the past year, with 4,576 registered on 7 June 2014. In concentrating on one of the most important resources for correspondents – fixers – one finds that the information on the site does not have the depth of knowledge that staff journalists can access via databases and debriefs from previous reporters' experience. The information regarding Syria is not underwritten by media organisations and special security operatives, but nonetheless it is up-to-date and is being underwritten by NGO workers and journalists, with contacts and knowledge from the destinations concerned. Social media networking does mean that the ground is being leveled somewhat in this field of contest, but it is still uneven. While one cannot ascertain which resource offers were

taken up by individual members, one can see that offers were made. Nonetheless, staff reporters continue to have access to more specialized resources and expensive training (paid for by the company).

Security is an evident problem with information put up on this site and how much you can trust it or the other people who offer it. This reflects the strength and weakness of 'bridging social capital'. As Vitak et al. state, "The tension between revealing and concealing information illustrates the kinds of challenges users face as they attempt to develop strategies that maximize the social capital benefits of these social media tools while minimizing negative outcomes" (2013, p. 244). The usefulness and low costs associated with the weak tie connections of these social network sites (Donath, 2007, p. 237) are irresistible to freelancers and mean that they can access more information and contacts this way than they would be able to do on their own. Elite staff correspondents do not need to use this kind of social networking in order to carry out their jobs. They do make requests on the site but they do not return or trade much information, and this includes regarding fixers. It appears they are not about to give away the accumulated social and cultural capital available to them via their own media companies or personal networks.

Notes

¹ Colleen Murrell's previous research on fixers comes from her unpublished PhD (2011) and from papers published from the thesis data. See references.

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