Introduction: A Tale of Two Fixers

"I call myself a rat," Solmaz confessed to me over posh coffee at a café on Istanbul's European side. It was 2016, and Turkey was the center of the world. Istanbul was a boom town for correspondents reporting on the European refugee crisis, the Syrian civil war, the Kurdish conflict, jihadist terrorism, and Turkey's own controversial president. It was also a boom town for the fixers who assisted those foreign correspondents.

Solmaz was new to the fixing game. She had recently left a career as a journalist in Turkey's national press. When her newspaper changed ownership and started printing government propaganda, a colleague advised she parlay her combination of English language and reporting abilities into a fixer's day rate that would keep her afloat. But as we sipped our coffees, she was soul-searching after a particularly grating experience with a foreign correspondent I will call Fred. Fred covered the whole of the Middle East for his newspaper and had recently arrived for a brief trip. A parachutist, in journo lingo. He hired Solmaz to help him get around town, connect him with sources, translate, provide background information.

Fred came to Istanbul to do a feature on the country's beleaguered LGBT community, but then had the mixed luck of also being in town on the occasion of a suicide terrorism attack. Fred and Solmaz rushed to the scene of the crime. Solmaz translated for Fred and convinced witnesses to do interviews. Fred wanted to get close to the blast site for photos, but police made him stay back from an area that they had cordoned off. He angrily protested that the cops had a "typical third-world mentality," and his anger extended to Solmaz for not fighting or sweet-talking strongly enough to get him better access – part of her job as his fixer, as he saw it.

Once the attacker was identified as an operative of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS), Fred next wanted to go to Çarşamba, Istanbul's most religiously conservative neighborhood, infamous as a

recruiting ground for ISIS and other extremist groups. Solmaz refused, saying that it was too dangerous.

By this time, she had decided that Fred was too bullheaded and conspicuous for her to trust him to be sensitive to cultural difference or to keep a low profile. He did not seem to be listening to her coaching: open with small talk, answer sources' questions about yourself before asking questions of them – especially sources steeped in a tradition of paranoia about foreign agents.

Fred meanwhile mistook Solmaz's unwillingness to broker man-on-the-street interviews with ultraconservatives – coupled with her ease talking with LGBT activists for their previous story – for antipathy toward religion. He categorized Solmaz as a secular elitist and grew dismissive of her advice and explanations. He did not trust her to be objective.

"I understand Islam!" Fred huffed in response to Solmaz's attempt to correct one of his misperceptions. Fred had to rely on Solmaz nonetheless, and the pair ended up settling on a routine story for the foreign press that year: the decline of tourism to beautiful, historic, tragic Istanbul in the wake of the latest violence. It was an easy compromise for a reporter and a fixer who were at odds and under deadline. At the Grand Bazaar, they talked to shopkeepers and tourists who said predictable shopkeeper and tourist things, and Solmaz secured Fred an interview with a tourism official – nobody she had labored to cultivate as a source, no bridge she worried Fred would burn. Despite her assistance, Fred decided, without consulting her, against giving Solmaz a "contributed to this report" credit on the articles they produced together. She griped to me of this snub to her sense of professionalism, even as she claimed not to want her name on his cliché stories anyway. Fred flew out a few days later, on to another country and another fixer.

Solmaz called herself a rat because she felt at that moment that her job, fundamentally, was to betray sources, to open doors and feed information to foreign reporters who did not respect those sources or consider their views beyond categorizing them according to lazy stereotypes. Fred, at least in Solmaz's telling, seemed to consider her a rat of another kind: betraying journalism for a secret allegiance to a local political faction (secular elitists, in his misunderstanding).

Fixers are caught between reporters and sources, between worlds with different cultural and political norms. Fixers' in-betweenness is

both what makes them useful in the first place and the principal source of their stress and self-doubt. Fixers face reporters' expectations from one side and sources' expectations from the other. When those expectations clash, fixers are thrust into states of moral ambivalence. Fred demands that Solmaz press dubious sources with uncomfortable questions, while those sources simultaneously demand Solmaz side with them against the suspicious foreigner. Solmaz feels like a rat because it can feel immoral to act as a proxy for a reporter – especially one like Fred – in extracting what they want from resistant local sources.

To avoid being caught in the middle of conflict, fixers get creative. They matchmake between compatible reporter–source pairs, like a writer who thinks their editor will be happy with a piece on the plight of Istanbul tourism and bazaar merchants glad to have an audience for their grumbles. They avoid matching short-term clients whom they do not trust with long-term sources with whom they have built up trust. They act as a buffer or reconcile differences between potentially clashing reporters and sources, as when Solmaz tried to coach Fred on culturally appropriate ways to approach sources and broach sensitive topics.

These strategies are not always possible and do not always work; sometimes, as with Solmaz, fixers' very attempts to manage the contradictions of in-betweenness discredit them to reporters or sources. But in success or failure, they shape what becomes news. An article appeared one day, in June 2016 in a major newspaper, about the deep discounts that tourists could find in Istanbul shops, in lieu of an article about ISIS recruitment in the same city, because Solmaz was more comfortable bringing Fred to the Grand Bazaar than to Çarşamba. Despite her part in determining what would become international knowledge about Turkey, Solmaz remained invisible to readers.

A Canadian reporter whom I will call Sally and a Syrian fixer whom I will call Karim chased that same terror attack story. Also based in Istanbul, Sally and Karim had a network of sources within Syria to tap, once authorities identified the suicide bomber as a Syrian national who had recently crossed into Turkey from the south. Unlike Fred and Solmaz, Sally and Karim had worked together for some time, long enough to trust each other, to know each other's blind spots, to become friends. Lovers too, but we will get to that later.

Karim reached out by phone to ISIS defectors and to sources with relatives in the Islamic State, asking if they knew the bomber. One heard a rumor he was from a town where Karim had a friend. Karim called the friend, who put Karim in touch with people who had known the bomber growing up. Karim also posted on Facebook that he was on the hunt for information; another friend responded that one of his own Facebook contacts had just posted about knowing the bomber from years back and being shocked. Both friends were willing to vouch for Karim as trustworthy and so help persuade sources to consent to interviews via Facebook or WhatsApp or Skype.

Sally was able to write a long profile on the bomber within days of the attack thanks to Karim's efforts and social network. Crucially, Karim was not only just a few degrees of social separation from the bomber, but also willing to call in favors and stake his own reputation that Sally would report the story in a way that maintained Karim's bridges to his contacts and kept sources living under militant rule in Syria out of danger.

Differences in the fixer–reporter relationship explain some differences between Solmaz's and Karim's respective performances on the Istanbul bombing story. Fred parachuted in and hired Solmaz for a few days' work. That was not enough time for much trust to develop or for them to understand each other beyond the level of stereotype. It was no wonder that Solmaz was unwilling to risk long-term relationships with sources for a client who would soon move on to the next country. By contrast, Karim and Sally had devoted years to their mutual apprenticeship, Karim learning about journalism and Sally about Syria. Sally expected to continue working with Karim and so had greater reason than Fred to care about her fixer's morale and rapport with sources.

Differences in Karim's and Solmaz's respective places in the history that was unfolding around them also help explain the direction each took in reporting the event. Their individual stories were embedded in the larger stories of the era's Turkish politics and Syrian civil war, and the larger-still history of the region's interactions with the rest of the world.

Each fixer was on their own trajectory within these larger histories: Solmaz from a local reporter for an opposition press being crushed by an authoritarian president to a behind-the-scenes broker learning to view her country through foreign eyes; Karim from penniless refugee to central player at the intersection of Syria-focused journalism,

humanitarianism, militancy, and espionage. These trajectories influenced whom they interacted with, on what terms, and with what aspirations. As our protagonists' stories unfold, you will see how fixers' strategies for brokering information and managing relationships with reporters and sources evolve hand in hand with their own positions in journalism and in local societies.

Broad trends of cultural politics are also among the cards that fixers are dealt. Fred's confidence in applying half-baked stereotypes and his sense of entitlement and distrust for Solmaz were not merely personal idiosyncrasies. Whether he realized it or not, Fred's understanding of the world and his place within it was informed by a well-worn master narrative, which literary critic Edward Said (1978) called **Orientalism**, that presents an exotic, backward Middle East as a foil for the rational, modern West and justifies Western domination over Muslims especially.

The point is, if we want to understand why the international media covers stories the way it does, we need to burrow all the way down into fixers' ever-changing moral worlds without losing sight of their connections to larger political contexts.

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Before proceeding, though, I must mention that Solmaz, Karim, Fred, and Sally are all composite characters created out of multiple real people. I conducted ethnographic research in Istanbul and in the eastern city of Diyarbakır from 2014 through 2016. I interviewed and observed reporters, fixers, producers, and editors at work and contributed – sometimes as a fixer, sometimes as a reporter – to news stories myself.[1] The stories you will read in this book are grounded in

[1] I met the participants of my study using a "snowball" method of recruitment: I asked people I knew in the field of journalism to introduce me to their colleagues, then asked those colleagues for contacts, and so on. When I began my research, I already knew a few foreign reporters based in Turkey from my previous time there and in Afghanistan and Iran and through Columbia University contacts. The foreign reporters with whom I initially connected were kind enough to put me in touch with fixers with whom they had worked and with other reporters and producers who did likewise. However, reliance on a snowball sample rolled from the nucleus of my initial contacts limited my own knowledge of the world I was studying and my ideas about the range of perspectives in that world. Stories in this book are of newsmaking for North American, European, Gulf Arab, and a few Japanese news organizations, but other foreign media do operate in Turkey. There are Russian and Chinese news outlets with offices in

real data that I collected in these encounters but remixed into composite narratives. The foreign news and aid organizations that appear in the text are likewise renamed and, in many cases, remixed composites.

Creating composites gave surer anonymity to the participants in my research. Reporters and fixers produce publicly available work, maintain large social networks, and rely heavily on their reputations with both colleagues and sources. Together, these factors mean that if I were only to change names, individuals and news organizations could easily be unmasked. In some cases, they could then face professional or even legal or physical harm.

As you will read, some of my interlocutors or their collaborators behaved in ways that violated standards of journalistic ethics; some were highly critical of armed groups or Turkish or Syrian governments. Journalists have been jailed at alarming rates in Turkey and killed at appalling rates in Syria in recent years.[2] My writing could put them in further danger.

A thread running through this book is that fixers come up with creative ways to maintain relative anonymity or to shift focus, credit, or blame onto others when safest for them to appear neutral or as mere technicians carrying out mechanical tasks. Although I will show how fixers, in general, actually have a good measure of influence and autonomy, I have no wish to spoil the *I'm-just-an-innocent-translator* cover story of any particular fixer in the real world.

The nice thing about composites is that a reader cannot recognize a character in the text as a real person and then deductively attribute everything else the character does and says to that

Istanbul, but they did not respond to my inquiries. I sought out fixers with experience working for those news outlets, but none of the 62 people who participated in my study had worked or knew anyone who worked for Russian, Chinese, or other countries' media. That in itself is an interesting finding, pointing to separate labor networks for different national media, but not as interesting as it would have been to actually talk to people in those other networks.

[2] As of 2020, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ n.d.-a) confirmed 26 journalists – both national and foreign – murdered for their work in the two countries since the outbreak of Syrian civil war in 2011, not to mention many more killed in crossfire or under unclear circumstances (all those murdered in Turkey were reporting on Syria). Rates of other violence and threats against journalists in or reporting on Syria are far higher. According to CPJ (n.d.-b), Turkey has vied with, and most years exceeded, China as the world's most active jailer of journalists since 2012, with less than one seventeenth of China's total population.

individual. The challenge was to create composites responsibly. After all, by combining multiple people's experiences into a single character, I compounded the risk – if not temptation – that all social scientists and journalists face: I could spin too-tidy tales, cherry-picking convenient data from here and there to "prove" my initial assumptions. I explain in the appendix how I did my best to create composite character narratives that were accountable to empirical data and followed a systematic logic, which served as tools to sharpen rather than dull my thinking.

I may have tried to keep myself accountable to the data I collected, but a composite narrative makes it impossible for readers to fact-check my work. Most frustratingly of all, the character Noah who appears in the following chapters is himself a composite character that I created to prevent the unmasking of certain research subjects to clients and bosses who knew they were participating in my research. Some of my own experiences are attributed to other characters, and some of other people's actions are attributed to my character, so you cannot even know what I actually did or witnessed firsthand and what is based on secondhand accounts.

Since composite narratives cannot be fact-checked in a conventional way, my recommendation is that you instead evaluate this book through comparison. Does my argument about fixers' moral ambivalence hold up when compared to brokers of other kinds? Does my point about labeling and social status claims help to explain your own peers' gossip about one another? Have you reacted similarly to the book's protagonists when pressured to squeeze your knowledge into an ill-fitting framework by a superordinate who knows far less about the topic than you do? Theories, after all, should be useful for explaining more than just the case at hand. They should also provide you with new ways to think about other cases. The sociological fiction of composite characters serves as a tool for identifying and illustrating patterns and building theories that you can test against your own experience of the world.

I hope to get you thinking not just about news fixers, but about how knowledge of all kinds is mediated through chains of brokerage. Perhaps the most important difference between sociology and journalism is that I am more concerned with providing theories that people can use to interpret facts, while the journalists I study are more

concerned with pinning down facts that people can use to substantiate claims, build their own theories, and make decisions.

This book will explain how fixers, reporters, and others create international news and why the news turns out the way it does. I will argue that the newsmaking process is contentious from start to finish, a series of unequal negotiations and sly translations that link together news contributors who are closest to events on the ground with the far-off expectations and narratives of media organizations headquartered on the other side of the world. Caught in the middle of local and global interests and values, fixers mediate between clients and sources in ways that reconcile political and cultural conflicts and transmit information across their divides. The role of the intermediary is precarious, offering fixers opportunity for status and power if they play their cards right, but disrepute and dissolution if they play them wrong.

The book is organized into five parts, subdivided into short chapters that recount the careers of fixers like Solmaz and Karim. I do not follow the usual template for academic monographs, which dictates that every section begin with an introduction that tells the reader exactly what is coming and a literature review that tells how the coming arguments fit into debates within the author's field. That style helps professors and graduate students efficiently extract theories for seminars and citations, but also makes academic books boring to read, like jokes that begin with the punch line or mysteries that begin with the solution (Hunter 2018). Instead, I foreshadow coming themes in introductory sections (as in the previous paragraph and the chapter summaries below) but then allow my full argument to accrue organically as I shift back and forth between character narratives and reflections on what they tell us about fixers' place in newsmaking. I hope this style makes for a more enjoyably surprising, if less tidy, read.[3]

There is nonetheless an order to the book's progression, consisting of a gradual zoom into the worlds of fixers. At each focal length, I will overlay outlines offered by different schools of social theory to help

[3] If you prefer a more conventional social scientific reading experience, I recommend you read the last chapter of each part before continuing to the narrative sections titled with character names.

show patterns in our protagonists' stories, and together, the various theoretical lines will converge into a unified picture. Along the way, I will also tell the story of Turkey's and Syria's transformations over the past two decades through the eyes of newsmakers. These histories are important in their own right, but also essential for us to make sense of characters' careers and the conflicts they mediated between their local and foreign interlocutors.

Part I is about the social origins of people who became fixers in 2010s Turkey and Syria. I explain why reporters need fixers and why fixing appeals to some people using classic oppositions of relational sociology: insider and outsider, order and disorder (Douglas [1966] 2001; Merton 1972; Emirbayer 1997).

Part II looks at the position of fixers within the field of journalism. Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005b) and Gatekeeping Theory (Shoemaker and Vos 2009) will help us see how media production involves collaboration along a chain of participants with diverse but interconnected interests and perspectives. Labeling Theory (Becker [1963] 1997; Goffman 1963, 1968) and Field Theory (Bourdieu 1984, 1993) will help explain how participants in journalism evaluate one another and strive to raise their own status.

Part III deals with the individual level of fixers as moral actors caught between competing expectations. Interactionist theories (Goffman 1959, 1969, 1974) about strategic self-presentation will guide my discussion of how fixers try, with mixed success, to manage their relationships with clients and sources and save face as the latter two come into conflict.

Part IV zooms in all the way to news stories and fixers' transformations of the information that passes from source to reporter. I will deploy concepts from Information Theory and Cybernetics (Shannon [1949] 1964; Weaver [1949] 1964; Wiener 1954; Bateson 1972) to answer a question that might arise in your mind: Why should I care about fixers and their problems, aside from motivations of curiosity or empathy? My response is that fixers' backgrounds, status struggles, and conflict-management strategies all come together at moments of interaction with reporters and sources in ways that shape what becomes news and informs your perception of the world.

By way of conclusion, Part V widens the frame back out to the global level, fitting fixers' careers into the international news economy

and flow of knowledge. I draw on the hybrid theoretical approach developed in previous chapters to explain why there can be no journalism without insider-outsider brokers (whether or not they are called fixers, whether or not they are even human) and yet why journalism's constitutive brokerage relationships are necessarily in constant flux.

Finally, a methodological appendix explains how I created composite characters for those of you still skeptical and/or interested in the relationship among social science, fiction, and truth.