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Working Practices Of Local Journalists Covering Internal Conflict In Swat, Pakistan (From 2006 To 2012)

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Abstract
This paper examines local journalists' practices and routines in a state of war in the Swat district of Pakistan. In the backdrop of the U.S.-led "war on terror," Pakistan launched lingering 'counter-terror operations' targeting a militant network called the Taliban. Based on in-depth interviews with journalists in Swat and its surrounding troubled districts, this research investigates the challenges local journalists went through while reporting death and destruction. It investigates how local journalists dealt with the trauma of visceral violence in their local, national, and international media coverage. Using Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory, especially its concepts of 'capital', 'habitus', and 'doxa', this research situates journalists and their routines at the center of troubled social life without distinguishing between the professional world and the newsroom from the community and its challenges. The paper argues that these journalists possess enough cultural and social capital; however, reporting was a challenging task as these journalists compromised journalistic principles of neutrality, objectivity, and professionalism.

Keywords: Local journalism, Internal Conflict, Field theory, Habitus, Working Practices

Introduction

Conflict reporting regarded as a significant subject in journalism studies. Academics and scholars have extensively researched war reporting and conflict coverage. They examine the experiences and responses of "global war reporters," "fixers," and "parachute journalists" with an emphasis on their professional assignments. Journalists covering internal conflict, however, indicate a vacuum in the academic study of conflict reporting that calls for more in-depth research and analysis.

Local journalists covering their ''own'' conflict study and the analysis of the

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reflections of these journalists is a contribution to knowledge. Academics and war journalists often write research and autobiographies, but understanding their responses and experiences from an insider's perspective is crucial. This research debates the local journalism environment and journalists' criticism of their role and approach during the "war on terror."

Literature related to conflict reporting has raised questions about censorship's influence on conflict news production (Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017), war propaganda (Cozma, 2015), and the discussion of objectivity in the Western context. Other academics have examined this relationship from the perspective of local reporters to reveal how local stakes are represented in global media in a conflict scenario. However, a focus is still missing on the structure of local journalism and how local relations of journalism transform in reporting the "war on terror" in the post-9/11 context. For instance, local reporters in the war-torn valley of Swat, are given bodyguards by the state to carry out their routine reporting assignments.

Journalists using armed bodyguards for local events raises questions about conflict dynamics, local journalism framework, and the interplay between them. Between 2006 and 2012, District Swat experienced a siege due to Taliban hostilities. The state's control over media outlets and manipulation of journalists facilitated the efficient functioning of the local journalism framework.

The Taliban attributed a perceived deficiency in local journalists' reports to a perceived lack of objectivity. They contested the State's authority, assuming a de facto sovereign position. Local journalists were pressured to report favorably about militants, perpetuating violence. The state used coercive measures, such as specialized security provisions, to militarize local journalism and expose them to militant groups. These preferential arrangements encompassed the authorization to carry firearms or allocating dedicated security personnel.

Investigating local journalism during conflict provides insight into subjective perspectives, professional practices, and contributions of reporters, highlighting challenging circumstances in reporting on systemic violence (Ashraf, 2018), as seen in the Swat conflict.

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This study investigates the factors influencing journalists' operational methods in the Swat district during the 2006–2012-armed conflict between the State and local Taliban. It uses qualitative research to determine targeted local journalism and identify journalistic practices arising from war pressures and established norms. The aim is to understand the motivations driving journalists' actions and professional practices.

Understanding local journalism practices is crucial, as it highlights the safety and well-being of journalists in conflict zones. Lack of training and biased reporting contribute to their safety issues. Many journalists have been killed due to these challenges. Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding of the responses of these journalists is essential.

Numerous scholars have endeavored to conduct empirical investigations on journalists operating in various conflict zones across the globe, employing diverse methodologies and approaches (Baglo, 2008). They have also examined the working practices and conditions of local journalists and the news practices of local media practitioners (Ashraf, 2018; Boczkowski et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there exists a dearth of perspectives from within the academic community. Most of these scholars engage in fieldwork by visiting conflict zones, interacting with local populations, conducting interviews with journalists who report on the local conflicts, and utilizing these firsthand accounts as a basis for narrative analysis to derive specific conclusions. What becomes absent is the perspective of a local individual with intimate knowledge of the subject matter. This investigation contributes to the internal perspective and explores the enduring journalistic predicament of enhancing local journalism in armed conflict.

Literature Review

Defining the concept of 'local' presents a formidable challenge, particularly in light of the pervasive influence of technology in contemporary times (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2020). Swat is linked to other localities, each with unique spatial and temporal circumstances of socio-cultural existence. The journalists residing in these small

settlements often establish their sense of identity based on ethnicity, clan, and tribe, which may not necessarily be tied to a specific geographic location. However, this concept of identity frequently transcends spatial limitations and possesses the potential for imaginative exploration. Swat-based journalists and news outlets predominantly employ the national or regional language to cater to a diverse audience within a particular community rather than targeting a specific demographic. Hence, we utilise the terminology 'journalists based in Swat' and employed the term 'local' in a more encompassing manner to incorporate all the seven districts within the surrounding Malakand Division.

Cross-Verification in a Conflict Situation

The verification of information poses a persistent challenge to the operational methodologies employed in conflict reporting. The significance of local journalists in accurately reporting stories is underscored by their intimate familiarity and comprehension of the specific community (Canter, 2014). Having a deep understanding of local knowledge and being well-informed about significant events enhances the overall quality of news reporting and the journalist's credibility, particularly in conflict-sensitive reporting (Williams, 2019). El-Nawawy and Powers (2008) examine journalists' significant role in conflict reporting. They highlight that the decisions made by journalists regarding story choices, story angles, and news sources are inherent to their profession. These decisions may occasionally result in journalists developing proximity to the warring parties (Ashraf, 2018; El-Nawawy & Powers, 2008). Reychler and Paffenholz (2001) support the assertion that how a conflict is portrayed in media influences the perceptions and attitudes of internal and external parties involved. This influence is exerted through selecting and omitting specific stories, utilizing particular sources, and adopting a particular stance towards ethical reporting. The presence of diverse journalistic routines and work practices across various regions globally can result in distinct approaches to reporting on conflicts. This observation is contingent upon the characteristics of the media landscape and the type of violence being covered (Esser, 2008; Hanitzsch, 2007).

Put differently, journalism does not adhere to a universally applicable set of

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standards, negating the notion of a uniform profession for journalists across the globe. The practices of media exhibit variation across different geographical locations, contingent upon factors such as a country's socio-political context, media outlets' ownership structure, and the extent of professionalism demonstrated by journalists (Esser, 2008; Van Dalen, 2012). The impact of media coverage on conflict has been examined by scholars, journalists, and researchers (Gritten et al., 2012). Additionally, suggestions have been put forth by Lundby (2018) regarding the appropriate manner in which media should report on violent conflicts. Several scholars, such as Ashraf (2021), have posited that local journalism assumes heightened significance during periods of conflict, as local journalists are tasked with fulfilling their journalistic obligations unbiasedly. According to Ashraf (2021), using a local reporter is deemed appropriate to obtain precise local perspectives. This approach facilitates a comprehensive examination of diverse circumstances, enhancing comprehension of a given phenomenon. The absence of local journalism has resulted in a significant disparity in the coverage of post-9/11 conflicts, with a notable emphasis on conflicts outside the immediate conflict zones (Williams, 2019).

The Question of Objectivity in a Conflict Situation

Objectivity has been a fundamental and debated principle and application within journalism since its establishment. Extensive scholarly literature exists regarding objectivity's practical and theoretical aspects within journalism and media studies (Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Gjelten, 1998; Schudson, 2001; Schudson & Tifft, 2005; Tuchman, 1972). The principles of journalism, particularly objectivity, may be subject to scrutiny in the context of reporting on local conflicts due to the inherent local affiliations that journalists may possess with any of the parties involved. The journalists in District Swat were subjected to such circumstances. Objective reporting imparts an impersonal form to a text, such as a news story.

Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that news reports are a form of discourse that tends to be constructed in a one-sided manner (Potter & Edwards, 2001). The pursuit of neutrality, impartiality, and the mitigation of journalist bias through the

reduction of personal sentiments, emotions, and subjectivity is not entirely successful in attaining these objectives (Ashraf, 2018). During periods of crisis, journalists may experience a state of being overwhelmed and burdened, which can occasionally result in missed opportunities to thoroughly explore issues objectively (Bauman & Bordoni, 2014; Zelizer, 2010). According to Steffens et al. (2012), crises and conflicts can serve as both challenges and opportunities for the reassessment of news coverage and allocating journalists' time in such circumstances. Nevertheless, objectivity and impartiality arise when local journalists engage in discussions about their community in a conflict occurring in proximity (Voronova, 2020).

Local media reporters often encounter challenges when attempting to provide objective coverage of conflicts between warring parties. This difficulty arises primarily from their proximity to the conflict, which exposes them to potential threats (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999). Understanding regional and local journalism dynamics within a conflict scenario holds significant importance and applies to many conflicts. Each conflict or crisis is unique, and the response of a local journalist differs from that of a non-local journalist. In the present scenario, local journalists possess vested interests in the situation and the community. The concept of attachment journalism refers to a form of local reporting in which journalists are considered active participants in the subjects they cover (Ruigrok, 2008). This approach has prompted debates regarding the notion of objectivity.

Words and phrases selection in conflict reporting: The selection of words and phrases in conflict reporting plays a crucial role in determining the level of intensity of the conflict, and the intervention of the media is of utmost importance in either escalating or de-escalating the conflict (Galtung, 2003; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2010; Reuben, 2009). According to these scholars, the selection of words and phrases, the framing of news stories, and the language and angle employed in these stories can significantly impact the audience's reaction, potentially eliciting either positive or negative responses to a given conflict. During the period encompassing the conflict between the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Myanmar Army in August 2017 (Amnesty International, 2018), global media outlets employed terminology such as "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" to characterize the hostilities.

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Nevertheless, the local media in Myanmar opted to refrain from employing such designations and instead presented an alternative viewpoint (Lynn, 2020; BBC, 2017; The Economist, 2017). In a similar context, journalists operating within the district of Swat employed alternative terminology, such as employing the phrases "warring parties forced or requested" instead of "killed" and "Fidayee" instead of "suicide bomber." Journalists have embraced alternative vocabulary, as appropriate terminology may provoke or inflame public sentiment.

Theoretical Framework

This research is theoretically linked with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) Field Theory. The Field Theory focuses on how the positions and powers of individuals posted in interlinked fields determine the available opportunities for individuals. Every field has a different structure with autonomy in social space, having specific regulations and authority. The theory examines how individuals construct social fields, and then such fields affect [other] individuals. Hence, like the market and other fields of life, the social fields are environments where a race between individuals and groups occurs. Bourdieu (2005) posits that a field is a setting where agents and their social positions are located. For example, the beat is a concept in journalism that means a particular area or subject a journalist is assigned for work. Some journalists work on the crime beat, and others on the terrorism beat. While journalism is a disciplinary and practical field with its settings, such as beats, routines, and practices, it is essential to know that these settings work according to the rules of the field. In other words, journalism, as a field, binds a journalist to follow specific rules as a code of conduct**.** In press clubs, for instance, this code of conduct is defined by ethical practices according to which specific practices are allowed, and others are not. The position of each particular agent (read journalist) in the field (read journalism) is a result of interaction between the specific rules (code of conduct), the agent's habitus (disposition or cultural and professional upbringing), and the agent's capital (experience). Each field has its own internal rules guiding how people can enter that field, progress within it, or be rewarded (Dickinson & Memon, 2012).

Habitus

The concept of habitus connects the individual level (agency) and the societal level (structure) by capturing internalized beliefs and dispositions that individuals acquire through socialization and accumulated capital. The relations between habitus and position within a field shape agency while, at the same time, actors lean more towards positions that best mirror their dispositions. Habitus of a journalist signifies his or her tendency towards a certain kind of behavior which is a disguised expression of the respective capital endowment and composition. This tendency is universal and, like a lynchpin, holds together the most disparate everyday practices, such as the taste for a particular art, food, or sport (Bourdieu, 1989).

Research Methodology

This paper investigates the practices and decision-making of local journalists operating in District Swat during armed conflicts, emphasising their internal circumstances. Participants were identified using a coded IP prefix and assigning a numerical value (e.g., IP1, IP2).

A comprehensive qualitative research technique has been chosen to investigate the dynamics of local journalists' experiences and behaviors in crises. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with local journalists based in Swat covering the Taliban militancy between the years 2006 and 2012. The Thematic Analysis (TA) approach has been used to learn from qualitative data about people's beliefs, values, and knowledge. Further, this strategy identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns (themes) within the data (Braun et al., 2014).

Research Findings and Analysis

Working Practices of Local Journalists During Conflict

The sense of insecurity compromised many principles of journalism like objectivity, fairness, and newsworthiness by local journalists in conflict. Access to verify the news with sources involved in the conflict to prepare a balanced report is always challenging, as well as the inability to uphold journalistic standards by confirming the information supplied by the sources, censorship, and word selection to construct news. Relying on one source can also be dangerous for local journalists, compromising their objectivity and professional responsibility. Objective reporting deepens conflict because it may escalate when contents are not balanced or describing

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the situation 'the way it is' (Martin, 1996). In comparison, other journalists claimed that 'the working and well-trained journalists in Swat tried their level best to portray the stance and rights of common citizens and report objectively' (IP9). Journalistic objectivity entailed achieving neutrality, fairness, and balance by those reporting events (Oller-Alonso & Meier, 2010). Many journalists strive to pursue objectivity, but practicing is problematic because it requires journalists to be 'detached' from their subjects rather than participating in the events they report.

The research found that local journalists were not given the freedom and favorable field in conflict reporting. Adherence to the principles of news is a constant challenge in conflict reporting. Cross-verification of facts, story angle selection, balancing the story, and choices of phrases are the challenges that compel a conflict journalist to practice self-censorship. Professionally, a journalist in a conflict situation needs to follow these rules; however, 'we were not allowed to practice them freely. At the same time, journalists claimed that their approach and practice were bound to follow the policy and goals of their media organization' (IP1, IP4, IP7, and IP11). Their responses suggest that personal and organizational interests have defined their role. They identified with the reported subjects and failed to follow journalistic principles.

When the Taliban blasted a girls' school, the journalists published that 'enemies of education blown the school,' though they knew that militants had blown it. It is important to note that journalists create conflict frames and phrases with a particular audience in mind. In this technique, words are coded in a certain way to get the desired result (Bartholomé et al., 2015).

This research found that local journalists in Swat practiced self-censorship frequently to ensure their safety. Censorship is stricter for local journalists, often resulting in lower-quality news reporting. Local reporters accepted the application of censorship as a survival strategy, given that they live in harm's way in proximity to armed actors.

Changing the story angle and selecting acceptable [to both warring parties]

terms and phrases are regular practices during the conflict, as most journalists admit (IP3, IP7, IP11, IP16). Reyes (2007) argued that censorship occurs in pre-censorship (journalist self-censored) and post-censorship (media censorship). Media organizations practice this censorship to ensure reporters' safety in conflict zones. This censorship prevented citizens from being informed. At the same time, journalists believe that public demand for impartial and fair reporting makes local journalists compel to avoid self-censorship. Factual information for a story was challenging, and 'it needed to be clarified whether the army was telling the truth or the Taliban. No one can say; however, we quote both sides and consider it a balanced story. Though we know the facts, we still censored it as there was a threat from warring parties (IP1).

The research found that the three probable reasons for censorship (political, economic, and fear) are a triple menace that is more explicit in conflict areas and is a challenge to fair journalism. There is tension between 'fair' reporting and suppressing information, mainly due to threats. In this context, self-censorship has become a firm survival and protection tool. However, attacks on journalists lead to a vacuum of information in the public sphere and the right to know.

Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews and thematic analysis data sets, the journalists' lack of access to conflict zones and information due to threats and pressure from warring parties impacted the journalistic responsibilities. The communities the journalists lived in and the pressure they faced within and outside their organizations largely influenced how they constructed their conflict narratives. Two situations occurred while local journalists in conflict performed their professional role; one was the challenge of working conditions, and the other was difficulty with 'working practices.' The first concerns fieldwork challenges like access to the conflict zone, difficulty verifying news, and interviewing the victims. The other concerns were selecting angles, choosing words, and practicing self-censorship. The interview data confirmed the literature that conflict-sensitive reporting is still essential for resolving disputes (Lynch & Galtung, 2010; Singh, 2013). Most participants mentioned they took care to prevent violence from escalating due to what they reported (e.g., IP7, IP 11, and IP 13).

The data analysis revealed that the fieldwork experience (working conditions,

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routines) had a visible impact on news production. Many journalists disregarded the standard of objectivity [working practices] during news production. After the fieldwork, in their offices or press clubs, the journalists identified news angles from which they chose words and phrases, keeping in mind the meaning attached to these words, and wrote their stories.

They assigned interpretations to their observations and shared the conflict with their communities per common beliefs. Because of this, the conflict's truth was formed "in layers" or "wrapped in language" (Stolley, 2010). In this 'field' where they counted the number of deaths, they relied on the ISPR version.

It means that the journalists' encounter with violence – what they observed at the scene is discarded and relies on the 'power' version under which they gained protection. Based on this data, it is a journalistic decision to be non-objective and influenced by an interest [safety].

Several journalistic strategies were noticed in the data to remain safe in a volatile situation in Swat. In order to substantiate their report, the journalists add reliable sources from the community (IP7, IP11, and IP14). As Philips argued, the choice of news sources rested on the journalists, and they interacted with eyewitnesses who endorsed their goals. The second strategy of local journalists in Swat was that a group of journalists prepared the news piece collectively and added various versions to the story. They only change the credit line when they share the story with their media outlets. For broadcast journalists, the timing of releasing the news was important. They share the story with their respective media organization at the same time. This strategy helps them to avoid criticism from warring parties.

Probing the interview participants' (IP) challenges of reporting conflict required the formulation of 'what' and 'how' questions to gain a deeper understanding of their responses and experiences (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). The 'what' in RQ2 interrogated the challenges that influenced the news production practices of conflict journalists.

Journalists face challenges reporting on the conflict at home and while living

amid violent conflict. This is especially true because they need regular access to information and discussion and also experience constant scrutiny from all parties involved in the conflict. All local journalists in Swat experience different challenges; those who report conflict. They survive the challenges which result from organized violence by the warring parties, and they may be traumatized in some cases. To gain support for their safety, some journalists fabricate facts about the fighting and the factions involved (IP6). This practice of avoiding journalistic principles triggers resentment among social groups.

In a war situation, working practices and adherence to the prime principles of news are constant challenges for journalists. Interview participants (IP) identified three significant challenges that influenced their news content production, accessibility to conflict area, various pressures [pressure from media organizations, family, warring parties, and Pashtun honor], and challenge of working practices [objectivity, selection of words, self-censorship). The journalists described these as the challenges confronting them but claimed that several strategies had been adopted to surmount them. These measures include the reporters' wait for the concerned authority version and reliance on eyewitness accounts.

Discussion and Conclusion

Academics have tried to examine local journalists in field settings by focusing on different conflict areas worldwide (such as Agha & Demeter, 2022; Feinstein, 2013; Høiby & Ottosen, 2019; Tumber, 2006). The local journalists' working conditions and local media practitioners' news practices have also been researched (Ashraf, 2018; Boczkowski et al., 2018). However, there was a lack of insider academic views. Most academics visit the conflict zone, conduct in-depth interviews with local journalists and use their samples as a narrative to analyze them to arrive at specific findings. What goes missing is the local view from an insider's perspective. This research aimed to expand the literature by addressing the problem by extensively studying journalists' responses and experiences to the conflict to understand how conflict narratives emerged in journalism. While journalists adopt various strategies to face the challenges, threats, and pressures and respond to internal conflict narratives, no research shows how these journalistic responses and strategies were practiced during

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the violent conflict in Swat. Thus, the current study has attempted to fill this gap in the literature of pertinent importance.

Since the area of scholarship on reporting internal conflict had been ignored in the extant literature, it was essential to explore it for further research. There was a commitment to carry out this in-depth investigation by speaking with journalists about their perspectives on the conflict and examining how they handled various terrible circumstances that later became extremely popular in Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Both objectives were achieved by formulating two research questions reflecting the critical thematic elements (factors influencing journalistic working routine and practices). The themes that emerged from the data are corroborated, given that local journalists have had profound critical reflections on their experiences and professionalism during the Taliban militancy. The themes created from the data focus on two research questions. Pierrei Bourdieu (1998) Field Theory was used as a theoretical framework to answer these research questions, to develop some variables and tools for the methods, and to support the discussion and interpretation of the data. Collected data presented different dynamics of the journalistic field (e.g., conflict reporting) in Pakistan, its formation, and the role of capital, habitus, and doxa relating to the media system in which it is located. The journalistic field has a different structure with autonomy in social space having specific regulations [doxa] (Bourdieu, 1998).

Local journalists covering internal conflict have contacts and sources within the military and the militants (the Taliban) who feed information to the journalists as news. According to Bourdieu (1998), this social capital indicates the possession of rare resources through connections usually used as a competition among the journalistic guild. A journalist with social capital is located along cultural and economic capital in the social space in a given society and at a given time.

The findings of this research suggest that the local media during the conflict contributed to the development of the social capital of local journalists. Local

journalists feel pressure and responsibility to present news content in an acceptable way that increases social capital. It is clear from this argument that local journalists often develop a worldview of responsibility to protect and project community issues.

This research argues that local journalists covering the conflict displayed the 'doxa' in their articulation of principal values of journalism like a journalist should be 'unbiased toward any party' (IP4), 'provide an opportunity to each party to present their version in the story' (IP7), 'accurate and fair reporting' (IP11), 'provide background information to educate the audience on a specific issue' (IP15). 'Doxa' was explicitly strong in journalists' conceptualization of their role in covering the violent conflict in that they discussed the ethical concerns of their reporting. The concept of 'habitus' in Field Theory indicates the degree to which journalists have a script to follow; once they know the script, they can improvise on reporting decisions. IP13 explains this improvisation:

> Militants blasted a school building, and I was on-site to report it. I was cautious in selecting words for my reports as the militants roamed around me. It was an indirect pressure. Thus, I used the term 'enemies of education destroyed the school' instead of using the word 'militants destroyed the school.

Neveu (2007) argues that this timely decision of words and angle section is a result of both primary socialization (through training) and secondary socialization (on-the-job training). Journalists needed help in the operation of their habitus. Habitus is often attempting to guide responses to a situation that is necessarily different than what is anticipated: the experience of the present is never the experience of the past (Bourdieu, 1977). Journalists articulated that they had various concerns about the operation of their roles, particularly the 'watchdog role' and 'informer role.' Local journalists considered themselves "important" and sometimes "less important". This put journalists in a more apparent position when describing their roles, reflecting the challenge to the classificatory system that operates through habitus. Journalists adopted the strategy to be creative to counteract the adverse effects of carrying out a role that would not operate as intended. The local journalists in this study could improvise

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creatively due to their agency within the habitus, as it is a traditional location where journalistic roles operate in the field. Experience brings more creativity to journalists' roles (Willig, 2013). During the data analysis, journalists in the Swat conflict made decisions vital to the situation and pressure. The greater their experience, the more adept and creative journalists tend to be in 'integrating past experiences' as a matrix of 'perceptions, appreciations, and actions' used at every moment and 'making possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks' (Bourdieu, 1977).

This research analysed Swat journalists' practices in conflict and the rationale of journalism amid an armed conflict. Empirical evidence exhibited confirmation that the research subjects (response of local journalists to internal conflict) have passed through a process of reflection and comprehension of their professional performance.

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