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Collaboration Between Academics and Journalists: Methodological Considerations, Challenges and Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This essay sheds light on the benefits and challenges produced by collaborations between academics and journalists, focusing specifically on the methodological considerations and ethics that arise during collaborations on sensitive fieldwork. Drawing on our experience of working together for a research project, we highlight the intricacies involved in building bridges between two professions while working towards a joint project outcome. Our reflections are based on our experiences during fieldwork conducted in London and Glasgow in August 2018 as we researched foreign fighters – mostly members of the Kurdish diaspora – who joined the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel/ People's Protection Units) to fight against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in the Middle East. We suggest that while working together can produce significant benefits for academic and journalistic collaborators, there are certainly challenges that arise, especially when risky topics are being researched.

Keywords: Journalism, Academics, Research Ethics, Sensitive Research, YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel/People's Protection Units)

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Introduction¹

Academics are increasingly expected to step out of their comfort zones and strive to make a larger impact on society, rather than simply exchanging research findings with their colleagues in the ivory tower. This new expectation – often explicitly endorsed by research funders – demands that academics look for new ways to make their research available to non-experts, policymakers, and other stakeholders. In their search for wider audiences, scholars increasingly direct their efforts toward semi-academic or non-academic media outlets.² Universities have started encouraging academics to engage with local, national, and international media, and many now provide media training to prepare academics for live appearances on TV and radio.³ Of course, one way or another, academics have been engaging with the media for a long time, mostly by giving interviews about their area of expertise; what's new is that they are now being encouraged to work with non-academics to co-produce outputs that might reach an audience beyond academia.

While researching this phenomenon, we observed that many academics are wary of requests for interviews, as they think their words may be edited to convey unintended meanings.⁴ For their part, many journalists might think that academics simply do not know how to speak to their readers; where they use academic opinion in their articles, they usually do so to add an “authoritative” voice and provide context and analysis in a brief, quotable way. Academics, on the other hand, use journalistic resources widely, especially if they are working on contemporary topics that have not yet become the subject of much academic literature. Both sides, to some extent, implicitly depend on each other, and the power relations between them are yet to be fully explored.

In recent years, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) – in collaboration with the BBC – has developed a special scheme called “New Generation Thinkers” for early career researchers (ERCs), which helps ERCs to disseminate their research findings by turning them into programmes for BBC radio. Elsewhere, many new media outlets have been set up to make academic research visible by adding a journalistic touch. One example is *The Conversation* which features articles, written by academics at PhD-candidate level and above, that are edited by professional journalists to make them more accessible to a broader audience. Forums have also been specifically created to bring journalists and academics together, among them the Journalism Knowledge Exchange.⁵

¹ This article was written as part of the Uncovering Security, a media skills development programme run by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, Stanley Foundation, and Gerda Henkel Stiftung. We thank these institutions for funding our research. Dr. Bahar Baser would also like to thank the Kroc Institute, University of Notre Dame, for hosting her during the completion of this article.

² Weir, “Dealing with the Press”, Inside Higher Ed, 5 November 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/11/05/essay-how-academics-can-deal-reporters> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

³ For instance, see University of Nottingham, “Media Training”, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/communicationsmarketing/services/service-details/media-training.aspx> (Accessed 8 June 2019), or University of Birmingham, “Media Training”, <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/external/creative-media/media-centre/Media-Training.aspx> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

⁴ See for example DiSalvo, “Why Scientists and Journalists Don’t Always Play Well Together”, 8 August 2011, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/daviddisalvo/2011/08/08/why-scientists-and-journalists-dont-always-play-well-together/#192978f61fd4> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

⁵ Hold the Front Page, “How Working Journalists and Academics can Help Each Other”, 31 May 2018, <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2018/news/guest-blog-how-working-journalists-and-academics-can-help-each-other/> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

Our own collaboration started with a similar initiative organized by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the Stanley Foundation, and the Gerda Henkel Stiftung. These foundations – one focused on media, one on academia, and the third on facilitating collaboration in relation to peace and conflict issues – came together in 2016 to encourage the sharing of skills and knowledge between the two fields on under-covered security issues. Launched under the name “Story Lab”, the project brought members of two professions together to discuss possible avenues for collaboration, both on specific projects and in general. This report’s authors were paired because of overlapping interests and encouraged to apply for a grant designated for participants. In the remainder of the report, we will use a plural first-person voice to make identification of our separate roles clearer.

In this short essay, we try to shed light on the benefits and pitfalls that reveal themselves when academics and journalists collaborate. Our reflections are based on our experience of working together during our fieldwork in London and Glasgow in August 2018, during which we researched the foreign fighters – mostly members of the Kurdish diaspora – who joined the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel/People’s Protection Units) to fight against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in the Middle East. Since our fieldwork findings have already been published by *Open Democracy*,⁶ our aim in this article is to reflect on our fieldwork as a collaborative methodological experience. We argue that, while academics are increasingly encouraged to collaborate with non-academics such as journalists and practitioners, there is little advice to help them resolve practical problems and complexities that can arise in the process, especially when they are researching sensitive topics such as terrorism and security. Sinduja Rangarajan and Laura Laderman of *RevealNews* claim that “Academics bring deep knowledge and expertise in their area of study, and journalists have mastered the art of telling stories. When academics and journalists collaborate, they can combine their skills to tackle complex questions and communicate the answers in ways that can have a huge impact on society”.⁷ We agree, but we also caution that collaboration between these two professions comes with challenges and limitations. In particular, we want to draw attention to two crucial and potentially problematic areas we identified while working together: matters of research ethics and methodology, and the complexities of conducting sensitive and/or risky research. While there is an emerging body of work explaining how journalists and academics can work together to produce better quality outputs for both sides’ purposes,⁸ it mostly addresses the basic issues involved in penning articles together or benefiting from each other’s work. This grant gave us the opportunity to scrutinize the methodological and ethical intricacies involved in conducting research together in order to create joint work. Our experience can therefore help to shed light on the challenges ahead and contribute to the debate about how academics and practitioners can collaborate in new ways.

Uncovering security: European Kurds joining the YPG/YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin/Women’s Protection Unit)

Our joint project has focused on Kurdish diaspora members who joined the Kurdish forces in Syria to fight against ISIS. Bahar is an academic who has been working on Kurdish

⁶ Martin, “Terrorism Policing”.

⁷ Rangarajan and Laderman, “Working Together 101”, 27 August 2018, <https://www.revealnews.org/blog/how-academics-and-journalists-can-collaborate/> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

⁸ Wen, “Two Sides of the Story”; Rensberger, “Why Scientists Should Cooperate with Journalists”.

diaspora activism for the last ten years, and she has extensive experience of researching Kurdish nationalism among diaspora youth.⁹ Nora, meanwhile, is a journalist who has lived in Turkey for some time and has reported on the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, as well as security and counter-terrorism policy, for media outlets such as the *Middle East Eye*. Both of us speak Turkish and English. We are both interested in understanding the dynamics of the ways in which European-Kurdish young people are mobilized towards the conflict in Syria, as well as in how they are treated in their host states, especially in the context of expanding counter-terrorism prerogatives. This issue is academically and journalistically under-researched and under-reported; the only published information on these individuals is to be found either in short news articles that mention a handful of names or quick TV interviews. We were interested in combining Bahar's expertise and Nora's reporting to better understand these fighters and their relationships with the diaspora community, their expectations versus the realities on the ground, and details of their trips to Syria, including any legal battles or diplomatic issues they had encountered on the way.

It did not take us long to understand how sensitive this topic was in the case of the countries we had selected. Bahar immediately categorized this research as "risky and sensitive" and mentioned this in discussions with Nora, who was aware of the issues but used a different vetting process. Bahar obtained ethics approval from her university in order to conduct this research. The aim of the project was to help Nora to produce journalistic articles informed by existing academic debates. She was responsible for leading interviews with lawyers who represented foreign former fighters, as well as with Kurdish association leaders and members, journalists, and scholars who have studied similar topics, as well as former members of police forces responsible for counter-terrorism, and political advisors. Extensive fieldwork was undertaken in other countries, but for a short period we worked in the field together; Bahar accompanied Nora for a number of interviews in London and Glasgow in August 2018, and there we had the chance to observe our differing approaches to conducting research.

Ethics when conducting sensitive research

Research ethics for academics and journalists

Most researchers are trained to protect themselves and their interviewees before they embark on fieldwork. For example, the protection of respondent confidentiality through the anonymization of interviews and observations is a highly important task that higher education institutions take extremely seriously. A mistake on the researcher's part regarding this topic might make the interviewees identifiable, which might put them and the researcher at risk, and the importance of confidentiality is heightened when research is being conducted on highly sensitive issues.¹⁰

Universities address this risk, not just by requiring training in research methods, but also by operating ethics committees, which head off future problems by examining each research project closely before it begins. In many countries, researchers, from PhD candidate to professor, need to apply to an ethics committee for approval and cannot embark on fieldwork without it. As part of their application for approval, researchers who plan to conduct interviews must prepare various additional documents such as consent

⁹ Bahar Baser, *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts*.

¹⁰ Marlies Glasius et al., *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*.

forms, project information sheets, translator confidentiality agreements, and data management plans. These documents must be handed to interviewees before an interview takes place to inform them about the particularities of the interview and the motivations behind it, as well as to explain how data will be used after the project is completed. Participant information sheets need to clearly state that participants can drop out of the interview at any time and can withdraw their participation within a given timeframe (usually a couple of months). Ethics applications require researchers and committees alike to think several steps ahead to minimize any risks to both researchers and participants. Researchers may need to wait some time for approval and may also be obliged to revise and resubmit their proposals before approval is granted.

Iron-clad as the ethical imperative is in modern academia, it creates a dilemma that immediately reveals itself to any researcher who embarks on an ethnographic study that involves interviews. As Karen Kaiser puts it, “Qualitative researchers face a conflict between conveying detailed, accurate accounts of the social world and protecting the identities of the individuals who participated in their research”.¹¹ There are broader disciplinary implications too; many academics, such as Hedgecoe, argue that “prior ethics review of research – originating as it does in the biomedical sciences – is unsuited for the oversight of social science (particularly qualitative social science), harming and impeding research especially that conducted on sensitive topics and populations”.¹² Other scholars show that ethics governance can inhibit methodological dynamism in the social sciences. Carey for one argues that rigid ethics approval procedures “often lead to researchers avoiding important topics of investigation, co-production or methodologies identified as sensitive or too difficult to navigate through overzealous committees”.¹³ Nonetheless, the need for ethical approval is non-negotiable as far as researchers are concerned, and the time it takes to secure is simply to be accepted.

Journalists work very differently. Time, for one thing, is a luxury they cannot afford. They need to act on leads quite quickly to get to a story before anyone else; for freelancers, this pressure is heightened if they want to be published via a well-paying or widely read outlet. This mismatch between academic and journalistic practice was one of the most challenging issues we faced, and we noticed it almost as soon as our collaboration started. Bahar had to go through an ethical approval process before our work together even began. This process started a few months before the fieldwork, and Bahar’s role had to be clearly identified from the outset. Considering the sensitive nature of the research, she limited her role to that of a consultant: in this role, she constantly discussed with Nora which questions could be asked, which details could be taken into account, and who could be identified as a potential interviewee. The outputs arising from the project would then belong to Nora, who was also responsible for the storage of the data.

For Nora, it was good practice to plan ahead of time in this way and to consider in detail the risks to both our interviewees and ourselves, something journalists should of course do, but which freelancers, without staff lawyers or editors to evaluate the risks for them, must do on their own. Professional practice, while not universally upheld, asks that journalists go through safety evaluations and training before carrying out reporting in a

¹¹ Karen Kaiser, “Protecting Respondent Confidentiality”.

¹² Hedgecoe, “Reputational Risk”, 486.

¹³ Carey, “The Tyranny of Ethics”.

risky field, but this training usually emphasizes the journalist's personal safety rather than that of their interviewees and fixers.¹⁴ Journalistic ethical standards also separately ask that a journalist working on sensitive topics take certain precautions when dealing with interviewees who could face harm from an interview; however, these codes of conduct are not codified across the industry,¹⁵ and while certain newsrooms publicly adhere to best practices, no mechanism exists to enforce them. Like universities, newsrooms avoid taking on liability for sensitive fieldwork, so if something goes wrong, the freelancer is held responsible. It was therefore a very new process for Nora to consult a university board so far in advance. While she was not responsible for filling out the application, Bahar had to ask her what she expected from the interviews during the application process. Because of the extended timescale on which they work, academics have room for forethought and control over their interviews that journalists usually do not, so, to them, setting out clear conditions beforehand might seem like just another conventional part of preparing and framing their research. However, journalists might tend towards more spontaneous interviews, depending on the subject matter, where one comment might derail the rest of the planned interview and set them on a whole new trail. To compound all this, our application was evaluated by a university panel according to standards of ethics and good practice which might be very different from those used by a journalist.

In the end, this all meant it was tough for Nora to predict how our interviews would go and respond to all of the ethical considerations raised at this advanced stage. Conversely, during the fieldwork, Bahar tried to act according to the ethics application submitted, which in some cases killed the spontaneous nature of the research and limited our actions in the field.

How do we protect our interviewees? How do we ensure anonymity?

Depending on the nature of the research, and in the UK in particular, the strict ethics obligations to which academics are subject occasionally include the obligation to disclose interview data that might benefit national security. While the boundaries of this requirement are not always clear, academics are generally fully aware that it might apply to them. Even the possession of certain documents might incur disciplinary action; moreover, simply downloading certain documents that concern terrorism or other security threats might require special permissions from their host institution.¹⁶ These problems are generally questions that journalists only worry about within internal ethical discussions. We were indeed working precisely on this question, trying to understand whether Kurdish diaspora members and other British citizens who join the YPG are fall under the jurisdiction of the counterterrorism police in the UK. There was significant media interest in foreign fighters, and it transpired that the British policy towards returning fighters was less than clear. When we started our project, these kinds of issues had never been reported on.

With all this pressure on the subject matter, we took pains to balance our approach, a process that revealed a clear boundary between academic and journalistic research practices. Sure enough, from the start of our project, we noticed that, while Bahar felt

¹⁴ Acos Alliance, "The Principles", <https://www.acosalliance.org/the-principles> (Accessed 10 June 2019).

¹⁵ Mediawise, "Codes of Conduct Archive", <http://www.mediawise.org.uk/codes-of-conduct/codes/> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

¹⁶ For more information and exemplary cases, see Hedgecoe, "Reputational Risk", 491-92.

uneasy with certain interviews and the information that the research participants might reveal, Nora felt much more confident about gathering information. While we will elaborate on this process below, we first discuss university-based approaches to the conduct of sensitive research which involves sampling that might include interviewees who conduct “illegal” activities, such as picking up arms for a foreign non-state armed group.

A note on researching illegal activities, which forms part of a British university’s research ethics policy, states that:

Researchers have the same legal obligations that they would have in any other context, as citizens or legal residents. As a private member of society, there is, however, no general legal obligation in the United Kingdom to report to the relevant authorities all illegal activity that one observes or learns about. However, there may be moral obligations to report in the following circumstances: 1. It may be a requirement of access, imposed by any relevant gatekeeper; 2. It may be a condition of research funding; 3. It may be a tradition within the specific discipline and/or research context (for example, in criminology there is a tradition of warning convicted offenders that confidentiality will be breached should the participant reveal a previously undetected offence); and, perhaps most importantly, 4. The researcher might see certain circumstances as requiring disclosure as a matter of personal morality and/or professional ethics.¹⁷

Researchers are thus encouraged to tell their participants that, in certain cases, they might need to reveal information to the authorities. The previously mentioned ethics policy continues:

The definite obligations to disclose that exist in United Kingdom law relate to child protection offences such as the physical or sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering and other crimes covered by *prevention of terrorism legislation* [italics added]. These obligations are concerned primarily with serious and immediate harm to others. These obligations aside, research is not covered by any legal privilege. Although there has been a long tradition of academic research into illegal activities, the courts have never considered whether or not one might lawfully refuse to disclose confidential information on “public interest” grounds – i.e. on the basis that the benefits of completion of the research to society at large outweighs any harm caused by the failure to report individual offences.¹⁸

These professional responsibilities might put researchers in a difficult situation. Explaining the risks of disclosing confidential data might deter participants from giving consent to interviews and similarly might disincline researchers from developing projects on what might be considered illegal activities.

¹⁷ University of Sheffield, “The University of Sheffield Research Ethics Policy Note No. 12”, https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.112762!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-12.pdf (Accessed 8 June 2019). See also University of Salford, “Ethics”, <https://www.salford.ac.uk/ethics> (Accessed 8 June 2019). Roehampton University, “Ethics Forms”, <https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/research/ethics/ethics-forms/> (Accessed 8 June 2019), and Manchester Metropolitan University, “Ethics”, <https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/research/staff/ethics-and-governance/ethics/> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

¹⁸ Ibid.

Besides following the ethical standards outlined in the university application, we mostly followed journalistic ethics codes when it came to gathering data. Journalists handling sensitive information have their own methods, which sometimes overlap with academic practices. First, they ensure that they have informed consent from their interviewees, which entails describing the full scope of the article and conveying the possible risks of publishing the interviewee's name or anonymous words. Throughout the interview, the journalist must clearly establish whether the information is either "on the record", meaning that it can be published and quoted; "on background", meaning it can be used but not attributed; or "off the record", meaning it should not appear in the article. Nora remarks that, when eliciting sensitive information, she prefers to turn off her recorder and refrain from writing anything down lest her materials make it into the hands of a third party. After the interview, she herself evaluates whether the information shared could harm the interviewee if published (if, for example, it could contribute to identifying the anonymous interviewee or be used criminally against them). If any of these issues arises, she would choose not to publish the material, or at least discuss the possibility of publishing it with the interviewee before deciding what to do.

Beyond the public product, journalists must be careful with the details of their work behind the scenes, from beginning to end. They must ensure that the interview and all materials relating to it remain confidential and within their hands. While academics can store their data on password-protected university servers – which are by no means immune to hacking and information-sharing – freelance journalists rely on non-institutionalized mechanisms of data storage, which means that they are obligated to research and stay up-to-date with the best available digital security tools. Journalists also rely on their editor's discretion when it comes to publishing and sometimes shaping their piece on a specific topic. The ethics of eliciting and using certain information can be discussed by reporter and editor – as opposed to by a formal university panel – because the information remains in their hands and they are the ones most familiar with the interviewee and story. However, newsrooms have changed significantly in the past decade and cannot always devote the resources and time they once could to ensuring full protection and ethical compliance. The burden, then, often falls on the shoulders of freelancers, who may or may not have adequate training.

Much like academics, journalists share a few tricks of the trade that are essential to keeping interviews confidential: all correspondence must be, if possible, encrypted or established by non-digital means; interviews must be conducted in private, in a place where the interviewee is comfortable; no notes and/or recordings (if the interviewee consents to be recorded) can be uploaded to a cloud server or any easily hackable system; and data should be stored in a safe place, encrypted if possible, and even deleted once no longer necessary. Since technologies constantly evolve, journalists have a duty to inform themselves about new tools and precautions to ensure that information remains protected at every point in the pipeline. Just one lapse can jeopardize the protection of the entire chain.

Even after these steps are followed, it is possible that state authorities will demand information on a journalist's sources. Journalists are typically discouraged from handing over this information. Each country has different laws on the rights of the press, but ethics that are becoming internationalized demand that the safety of interviewees, and the trust established with sources, must come first. This issue came up when we interviewed two

retired police officers in the UK who had worked for counter-terrorism units in the past. They warned us that journalists are in fact more protected than academics when it comes to revealing information to the authorities, as well as when putting themselves at risk researching sensitive topics.

Is sensitive research more attractive for journalists?

A story is not attractive merely because reporting it is risky – or at least, it shouldn't be. However, stories based on risky reporting often appeal to certain media outlets because risk carries an aura of marginality, popular fascination, taboo, and lawlessness. For freelancers working in today's media economy, a risky story may be an easier sell than a more prosaic one. Budget-strapped newsrooms are now hesitant to pay for the expensive safety measures involved in sending staff on these risky assignments, so independent journalists might be able to secure "exclusive" access that full-time employees would never get.

In our case, however, the risk we were dealing with was associated less with our fieldwork itself than with the consequences of publishing. The topic is clearly a red line if we are ever to work in Turkey, and publishing work on it could even pose problems elsewhere abroad. Still, having weighed the value of investigating the subject against the potential yet avoidable issues that could arise once it was published, we nonetheless decided to proceed. This is, however, the main reason why Nora decided to publish her articles under a pseudonym. Publishing under her own name might have jeopardized her potential reporting in the future, considering the fact that many foreign journalists in Turkey were arrested or deported as a result of publishing articles on the Kurdish question.

What made this work sensitive was that we were researching matters that clearly fall within the realm of counter-terrorism. For instance, we followed the case of James Matthews, a former British soldier who volunteered with the YPG to fight against ISIS and, upon his return, faced terrorism charges.¹⁹ While charges against him were ultimately dropped, Aidan James, another fighter facing the same charges, was awaiting trial at the time of our fieldwork.²⁰ We were trying to understand, firstly, how fighters such as these left the UK for Syria, and secondly, how the UK government and police responded to their cases. Our findings might have been of interest to state intelligence agencies, who could have asked us to share some of our material, which could then be used against the people whose cases we were studying. Much of this information has already been covered by certain newspaper articles, meaning Nora needed to dig deeper to find original material.²¹ This in turn meant expanding our interviewee pool to find people who could supply original information. At this point, we noticed how much our approaches to the fieldwork differed.

¹⁹ Dearden, "James Matthews", 7 February 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/isis-fighters-anti-british-uk-ypg-charged-terror-offence-james-jim-matthews-kurds-training-camp-a8199796.html> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

²⁰ Blake, "British Man who Fought Isis in Syria Charged with Terror Offences", 16 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/feb/16/british-man-aidan-james-fought-isis-syria-charged-terror-offences> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

²¹ Vardy, "British Men Prepare", 24 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42799284> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

As an academic, Bahar is used to collaborating with participants and interviewees on a long-term basis: she works on protracted research projects rather than quick-turnaround, one-off news stories. For her, maintaining trust and good relations with what she calls “gatekeepers” or “stakeholders” in the field is a priority. Therefore, she was extremely careful not to risk breaching their trust and was not insistent when it came to arranging interviews. Initially, we believed that her previous research networks would be an asset for this project; however, this topic was an extremely sensitive one, and we quickly realized that the people we contacted either found excuses not to comment or specifically mentioned that they did not feel comfortable. In particular, academics who work on the Kurdish issue mentioned that they did not want to give interviews to journalists. When Bahar met with this distrust and insecurity, she would not email interviewees again or insist on arranging interviews.

By contrast, as a journalist, Nora was very keen on meeting as many people as she could, especially in the limited amount of time afforded by the grant. When working in unfamiliar territory, journalists often work with fixers who help them;²² for this particular study, we did not have the benefit of a fixer and instead we relied on Bahar’s networks alone. When finding interviewees started to become challenging, Nora used her journalistic skills to reach people. In the beginning, Bahar felt uncomfortable sending multiple emails to potential participants and calling them directly when they did not answer, yet it quickly turned out to be a successful way to get this research done, whether because interviewees react to journalists differently or because Nora’s determination made the interviewees trust her. Nora also very quickly helped Bahar familiarize herself with how journalists operate in the field:

Our reputations as journalists rely not only on our final products, but also in the way we treat our interviewees. If we want to continue treating sensitive subjects, we must have a good work ethic, and if we want to conduct meaningful interviews, we must establish trust. If anything, we owe these to our interviewees and readers, as people.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to address the practical methodological and ethical problems that can confront academics and journalists when they collaborate. Our experience contributes to existing debates on ethics governance in social sciences with regards to sensitive topics, and it opens a new debate on the merits of academic/non-academic collaborations. We would argue that, while this collaboration was a fruitful exercise, working together came with its limitations and challenges, largely due to the sensitive nature of the topic under scrutiny.

Yet despite certain frictions between our different ways of working, we both learned a great deal from the experience. Academic work and journalistic work each have their own

²² Al Jazeera defines a fixer as “the local man or woman on the ground who secures that critical interview, gets access to that all-important location, who reads between the lines when the situation is rife with local complexity. They know the local news terrain and open doors few foreign correspondents ever can on their own. They’re multi-skilled – part translator, part researcher, part editorial consultant, part security specialist”, “Fixers: The Unsung Heroes of Journalism”, 17 June 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2015/03/fixers-unsung-heroes-journalism-150307111219380.html> (Accessed 8 June 2019).

uses and visions, so each methodology is necessarily different. Working together encouraged us to reflect on how we work in our own fields and why and to consider other styles that might enhance our work: Bahar saw how a little bit of insistence can go a long way, and Nora engaged with a systematic way of posing ethical questions.

Our choice of a sensitive and politically charged topic only amplified the contrasts between our professions. Journalists are in the habit of handling potentially compromising topics from which academics often shy away, and there are plausible possible reasons for these differences: journalists, with little job security, are encouraged to step over a line that others would not, while academics are wary of upsetting their superiors, who themselves want to avoid anything that might tarnish the reputation of their university as a whole.²³ There are risks for both: journalists chasing a story might overlook ethical considerations, while academics might avoid opportunities to dig deeper on important issues simply because they are sensitive. The two professions can complement each other well, then, and a bit of encouragement and guidance from both sides would facilitate future collaborations. Moreover, ethical guidelines could be revised to allow these kinds of collaborations to proceed, not least by leaving researchers room to make spontaneous decisions and offer full confidentiality to their interviewees.

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²³ Hedgecoe, "Reputational Risk".

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