

Book Review

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Conflicted: Making News from Global War. Isaac Blacksin. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2024. 320 pp.

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Isaac Blacksin's *Conflicted: Making News from Global War* critically examines the complex dynamics of war reporting, especially in the Middle East, through the lens of journalism studies and ethnographic research. Blacksin, an Assistant Professor of Critical Media Studies at Texas A&M University, draws on 3 years of fieldwork in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan to deconstruct how war narratives are constructed and mediated. In the final part of the book, he addresses issues related to the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war.

The book is structured into six chapters, each addressing a distinct aspect of war journalism. Methodologically, Blacksin employs discourse analysis, 3 years of ethnographic fieldwork, interviewing 70 journalists and fixers, and autoethnography, offering a comprehensive critique of how war is represented in the media. Chapter 1 investigates the construction of narrative realism in war journalism, critiquing terms like “Hezbollah stronghold” for embedding ideological meanings that shape public perception and policy support. He notes that using such terms can lead to the creation of biased narratives and normalized the complexities of conflict zone. He also critiques the limitations of *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* (p. 29), a 385-page guide that shapes journalistic conventions by establishing “rules of the game” for reporting. These rules, while aimed at standardizing language and ensuring clarity, often reinforce ideological biases, contributing to oversimplified and hegemonic narratives in war journalism. This chapter portrays the politics of naming in several terms related to the war.

Chapter 2 critiques journalistic conventions like casualty counting and bylines for marginalizing local voices, such as fixers and freelancers, and legitimizing Western-centric narratives. He argues that fixers (who worked with war journalists as informal, travel guide, interpreter) have a considerable role in creating war narratives, but that fixers have largely been marginalized by renowned media outlets.

Chapter 3 analyzes the portrayal of military operations, particularly U.S. efforts against the Islamic State, where civilian casualties are often minimized as “collateral damage.” Blacksin critiques this ethical compromise, arguing that it obscures the

human cost of war. He also discusses the psychological impact of military checkpoints and asks, “why does today’s war reportage reproduce one meaning for war, and displace others” (p. 119). This question challenges the dominant narrative of war as a necessary, protective action while highlighting the displaced meanings, such as the lived experiences of civilians, the historical and geopolitical contexts of conflicts, and the structural critiques of military power. Chapter 4 explores the ethical challenges journalists face in conflict zones, questioning the possibility of true objectivity when reporters navigate the pressures of political and military influences. Blacksín argues that war reportage often serves the interests of dominant geopolitical powers by framing violence as humanitarian intervention, legitimizing military actions, and perpetuating narratives that align with the goals of state actors. These interests include controlling public perception, justifying civilian harm under moral frameworks, and obscuring the structural causes of conflict.

In Chapter 5, Blacksín explores the personal traumas of journalists, highlighting the psychological toll of war reporting and its impact on the portrayal of conflict. The mental and psychological well-being of journalists is often overlooked even as they play a significant role in shaping war narratives. He reflects on the fear journalists experience on the front lines, the long-term psychological trauma such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the fear of being killed. Blacksín illustrates this tension through several stories, including the story of Daniel, a journalist who endured an abduction in Syria. He notes, “The events Daniel reported are clearly traumatic, but the trauma of the event Daniel experienced is nowhere in evidence . . . A disorderly reality is suppressed, but cannot be disappeared, by the frictionless reality suitable to an enduring fantasy of war” (p. 175).

Chapter 6 highlights the role of alternative forms of war reporting, such as citizen journalism and independent media platforms, in amplifying voices overlooked by mainstream coverage. These platforms challenge dominant narratives by presenting diverse perspectives and underreported stories. Finally, the epilog addresses the Russia–Ukraine war, arguing that while the nature of war evolves, the underlying challenges faced by journalists—bias, safety concerns, and the constraints of objectivity—persist. Blacksín also identifies recurring patterns of representation across different conflict zones.

Blacksín’s critical media studies framework, influenced by post-structuralist theories from Michel Foucault and Edward Said, is evident throughout the book. He argues that dominant war narratives reinforce hegemonic power structures and, by extension, often marginalizing local perspectives. The book’s strengths lie in its thorough ethnographic research and detailed critique of mainstream war reportage. Blacksín’s insights into the role of fixers and freelancers, who are crucial yet underappreciated in conflict reporting, add depth to the discussion. He also emphasizes the importance of “War Hotels” and how gossip in their lobbies helps shape war narratives. In addition, the exploration of ethical dilemmas faced by journalists and the psychological impact of war reporting offers a rare, introspective look into the profession.

However, the book’s focus on Western perspectives might be a potential limitation, as it overlooks diverse global approaches to war journalism. For instance, examining

how journalists from the Global South navigate conflict reporting—amid limited resources, restrictive press environments, or distinct cultural values—could have provided valuable contrasts or affirmed Blacksin’s arguments. Research by Johana Kotišová, for example, highlights how structural and cultural factors shape war reporting differently in non-Western contexts (Kotišová, 2023), offering insights that might have nuanced or expanded the book’s critique of mainstream war reportage. Furthermore, while the reliance on autoethnography brings deeply personal and reflective insights, its subjectivity limits the generalizability of some conclusions. A broader, comparative framework incorporating global examples could have enhanced the book’s reach and applicability.

Conflicted offers a compelling critique of war journalism that challenges conventional narratives and advocates for a more detailed and critical approach to conflict reporting. It significantly contributes to media studies, journalism, and conflict communication, providing valuable insights for scholars and practitioners alike. Blacksin’s work critically examines the media’s role in constructing war narratives and its call for more inclusive and authentic war reportage. This book is essential for anyone interested in the intersection of media, war, and society.

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Reference

- Kotišová, J. (2023). The epistemic injustice in conflict reporting: Reporters and “fixers” covering Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine. *Journalism*, 25(6), 1290–1309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231171019>