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# The Affective Epistemology of Digital Journalism: Emotions as Knowledge Among On-the-Ground and OSINT Media Practitioners Covering the Russo-Ukrainian War

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we seek to introduce the term “affective epistemology” into digital journalism studies. Building on twenty-seven interviews with media workers reporting on the Russo-Ukrainian War and digital documentation analysis, we address the following research questions: What is the epistemic value of media practitioners’ emotions? How do emotional attachments shape how media professionals and open-source analysts navigate fact-finding and neutrality? We argue that media professionals’ emotional engagement is a form of embodied knowledge with cognitive and strategic rationality. We identify four epistemological affordances of emotions and illustrate that emotions motivate journalistic practices and are motivated by reality on the ground and available knowledge, can serve as a methodological and an epistemological tool, and form a part of reality; emotions also drive innovations and facilitate team collaboration. Furthermore, we argue that the Russo-Ukrainian War is a context where the discourse on impartiality, neutrality, and detachment becomes experienced as problematic and counterproductive. We show how the work of journalists is changing as they align with discourses on human rights and justice and legal fact-finding bodies that are committed to legal objectivity.

## KEYWORDS

Affective epistemology; emotions; fixers; conflict reporting; digital journalism; open-source investigation; Russo-Ukrainian War

## Introduction

In the digital age, the evolving standards of knowledge generation have shaken journalists’ conceptions of evidence and knowledge. The role of digitalization of news media in the diffusion of disinformation and the need to redefine media business

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models (Ekström, Lewis, and Westlund 2020) have made media scholars question the viability and future of journalism (Zelizer, Boczkowski, and Anderson 2022). This digitally augmented uncertainty added to pre-existing legitimacy issues inherent to the porous and constantly evolving field (Ferron, Kotišová, and Smith 2022).

In conflict reporting, but also digital journalism more broadly, some of these legitimacy issues have been grounded in fear of journalists' emotionality, bias, and activism: the deeply rooted assumption that journalists' affective proximity to events they cover (Al-Ghazzi 2023) opposes their rationality and objectivity and thus hinders professionalism. For example, recent research has illustrated that local media professionals in conflict zones experience epistemic injustice (Kotišová 2023; see also Fricker 2007 and Kulbaga and Spencer 2022): because they are local, female, or do not work for a powerful Western company, they are believed to be "too emotional," biased, and/or not professional enough. While these structural inequalities in credibility and power over knowledge production often correspond to the broader and long-established hierarchies in conflict reporting, such as the hierarchy of risks and safety (e.g., Creech 2018; Palmer 2018; Pedelty 1995), they have started to be criticized only within the recently emerging feminist and postcolonial perspectives on global journalism production (Blacksin and Mitra 2023; Kotišová and Deuze 2022).

This paper takes a step further—beyond the epistemic injustice—and introduces the term "affective epistemology" into digital journalism, articulating the idea that media professionals' emotional engagement is a form of embodied knowledge with cognitive and strategic rationality (Ignatow 2007; Scarantino and de Sousa 2021). It does so by focusing on media professionals working in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The "radical" character of this war (Ford and Hoskins 2022), where the logic of algorithms, social media, apps, misinformation, and disinformation permeates the logic of the warfare to an unprecedented degree, collapsed the distinctions between audiences, journalists, and soldiers, media and weapons. Media professionals covering the war, such as Ukrainian and foreign journalists, have been treated as military targets by the Russian army (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). These circumstances drag media professionals physically, politically, and emotionally into the core of the conflict and thus challenge the supposedly emotionally detached, impartial forms of journalism that are standard in the Global North (Al-Ghazzi 2023; Kotišová 2023) and emphasize journalists' spatial, material, and social situatedness and emotional experiences (Creech 2017; Moran and Usher 2021; Steiner 2018; Usher 2019). This context, perhaps more obviously than some other contexts, thus requires taking journalists' situatedness and emotionality seriously (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). This paper aims to do so by bringing the concept of affective epistemology into digital journalism studies.

We address the following research questions: What is the epistemic value of media practitioners' emotions? How do emotional attachments shape how media professionals and open-source analysts navigate fact-finding and neutrality? Building on twenty-seven interviews with media workers reporting on the Russo-Ukrainian War and digital documentation analysis, we discuss the variety of ways in which media practitioners' emotional attachments—to the contexts they cover and certain values—allow for crucial locally situated knowledge. We also show how practitioners position themselves to the notion of neutrality and how they relate to fact-finding processes.

## Affective Epistemology

The traditional understanding of professional journalistic epistemology is defined by values such as objectivity and autonomy. A professional journalist is supposed to be objective, meaning emotionally detached, neutral in tone, and rational rather than emotional (Pantti 2010; Peters 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen 2016). These norms—neutrality, non-involvement, detachment—are firmly intertwined with the history of professionalization of American journalism, and to some extent, Western journalism more broadly (Schudson 2001), and continue to shape the journalistic mainstream (Hanitzsch 2011).

The mainstream norms and roles of journalistic professionalism also continue to be exported beyond the Global North (Mutsvauro et al. 2021). In areas ridden by conflict, they meet with journalists' affective proximity to events they cover. Syrian journalists studied by Omar Al-Ghazzi (2023, 5)

felt they had to juggle their position as locals who naturally are emotional about, and close to, what is happening in their country, with journalistic obligations of being truthful, objective and fair in their witness reporting.

This clash, also identified among Ukrainian media professionals (Budivska and Orlova 2020), illustrates how, in the mainstream logic of global journalism, emotions and affects are linked to danger or failure (Stupart 2021). They are believed to carry risks for mental well-being (see Flannery 2022), and—since they are identified with activism, the decline in journalistic quality standards, bias, tabloidization, and sensationalism—hinder professional practices. In turn, emotionality becomes a source of credibility deficit and epistemic injustice (Kotišová 2023).

This juxtaposition of journalistic professional values and emotions, however mistaken or ideological its premises can be, has become a cliché in journalism studies (e.g., Kotišová 2017); few authors go beyond it and look into the epistemic value of media practitioners' emotional attachments and how their emotions help to know. Such a perspective that we develop in this paper is not far from the Feminist Standpoint Epistemology, or FSE (Steiner 2018), which also raises expectations regarding a possible response to the “post-truth crisis” that has shaken journalists' credibility, the exclusivity of their knowledge, and epistemic authority. Its advocate within journalism studies, Linda Steiner, rejects proposed solutions to the objectivity crisis, such as settling for transparency or resorting to judgemental relativism (treating each person's judgment as equally valid), and instead proposes replacing the objectivity paradigm with a focus on bodies of knowledge that are socially situated and limit and enable what one can know. The FSE, grounded in the notion of bodies of knowledge, thus suggests that “knowledge comes from someplace: a standpoint, which is partly grounded in, inter alia, embodied experience” (Steiner 2018, 1856) and that our (emotional, bodily) experiences offer insights that are unavailable to those lacking such experiences<sup>1</sup>. By doing so, the FSE reveals the meaning of particular positionalities and recenters the “web of relations denied but never disappeared by the professional journalistic norms of objectivity, balance, and distance” (Blacksin and Mitra 2023, 10). For journalism, this means that journalists' and their subjects' raced, sexed/gendered, and classed embodied experiences “should be treated as potential resources” (Steiner 2018, 1856).

The affective epistemology that we explore in this paper further stresses that the narrow conception of journalistic epistemology as a purely intellectual endeavor based on objectivity, neutrality, and distance (Al-Ghazzi 2023; Blacksin and Mitra 2023) fails to acknowledge that emotions are, in some respects, indispensable for rationality and cognitive processes (Damasio 1994; Ignatow 2007). One of the reasons why emotions traditionally have a bad reputation in knowledge disciplines, including journalism, is their association with femininity (Kulbaga and Spencer 2022). Nevertheless, there is a trend toward their rehabilitation (Brun, Doğuoğlu, and Kuenzle 2008; Candiotta 2019b; Scarantino and de Sousa 2021). According to Brun and Kuenzle (2008), emotions have a motivational force, can be sources of salience and relevance (they establish a focus on certain aspects of a situation), provide epistemic access to specific response-dependent facts, contribute to the formation of cognitive categories, and enable rational deliberation by selecting relevant information. This is not to say that emotions cannot mislead our judgment. Instead, their positive and manifold epistemic value has been significantly underrated, and their potentially misleading image has been based on professional journalistic ideology rather than rigorous analysis.

The idea that emotions have room in journalistic truth—in particular, in war contexts—was articulated long ago by the journalist Martin Bell (1998, 16) in his concept of journalism of attachment: “journalism that cares as well as knows; (...) that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor.” However, the trend of recognizing the epistemic value of emotions is only slowly gaining ground in journalism studies. A part of the recent body of journalism research on emotions describes them as potentially appropriate and valuable, and thus beneficial to newsmaking processes. Conflict reporters’ emotional experience can help them understand victims’ and survivors’ emotions and help practical ethical reasoning (Stupart 2021). By comparison, investigative reporters use anger as a “fuel” that drives them; anger and contempt can also yield moral knowledge and judgment inherent to investigative journalists’ work and point to facts (Engel 2019; Stupart 2023). In other words, anger as an emotion can be “correct” or “fitting” when a certain standard or norm has been violated, thus potentially pointing to this norm and its violation. Anger is also a way of knowing in the feminist “outrage epistemology” (Kulbaga and Spencer 2022), claiming that some topics may not be known without anger and revolting against the credibility deficit marking emotions in communication research. Another important feeling is trust, playing a vital role in participatory sense-making and cooperation within these epistemic communities (Berninger 2019; Candiotta 2019a). Finally, local journalists’ work largely depends on affective ties with their contexts (Wahl-Jorgensen 2022). In local conflict reporting, many local and locally-based media practitioners suffer along with their communities (Budivska and Orlova 2020). This experience can also be epistemically significant: it captures and increases attention and helps understand certain values (Brady 2019).

These works on local, investigative, and conflict reporting, trust, anger, and suffering together suggest that “emotion is an important part of how (and whether) [journalistic] practices are successfully done” (Stupart 2021, 270). This paper aims to go a step further by providing a granular understanding of the epistemic value of emotions and by staging media professionals’ own experiences of the (ir)relevance of traditional professional norms, such as detachment and neutrality. Their perceptions should be

taken as serious input into discussions on what counts as informational validity (McNair 2017) in the context of conflict reporting. Our argument is based on a study of professional epistemological practices among two (often collaborating) groups of media practitioners covering the Russo-Ukrainian War.

## **Communities of Media Practitioners in Conflict Reporting**

### ***Fixers and Journalists***

The media professionals working on the ground—journalists, photographers, fixers, and local producers—constitute the first epistemic community that this paper builds on. Not only journalists covering conflicts but also fixers and local producers now belong to traditional subjects of journalism research (Murrell 2010; Palmer 2018); therefore, we discuss them only briefly.

Their epistemic authority stems from direct witnessing (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013) and is both boosted and hindered by local knowledge (Arjomand 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen 2022). It is boosted because the local(ized) media practitioners' close (affective) relationship with the Ukrainian community and its members, their co-presence, enables them to know the local context in detail. However, as explained in the previous section, the same local embeddedness creates a situation of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Kulbaga and Spencer 2022) where the very affective proximity, often together with nationality, ethnicity, or gender, can be a source of mistrust and suspicion of bias and flawed professionalism (Al-Ghazzi 2023; Arjomand 2022). This is only one of the many inequalities between local and foreign media professionals collaborating on the coverage of conflicts—there are many more inequalities related to the distribution of physical and mental health risks and remuneration (Creech 2018; Kotišová and Deuze 2022; McAvoy 2021).

### ***Open-Source Analysts and War Crime Investigators***

The second epistemic community, open-source investigators and open-source intelligence (“OSINT”) analysts, search for, aggregate, verify, use, share, and archive media for further analysis, newsgathering, and investigation (Gregory 2022). OSINT actors that we associate with (global) investigations interpret and verify user-generated content shared by eyewitnesses using satellite and drone images as well as non-visual data, and increasingly collaborate with professional journalists and investigators on the ground, fact-checkers working for media outlets, human rights collectives, digital archives, and even legal bodies (Bjerknes 2022; Gregory 2022; Müller and Wiik 2023; Ristovska 2019, 2022).

OSINT actors are known for embracing digital affordances and digital cultures of participation (Milan and van der Velden 2016), and they legitimate their methods by aiming for transparency and traceability (Higgins 2022a). However, legally and morally speaking, their practices are still very diverse (Dyer and Ivens 2020), as the “OSINT” label binds (individual) military aficionados, weapon specialists, journalists, anonymous collectives, and human rights groups. We have selected the collectives for our study within the subfield of “Open-Source Investigations” (OSI) in war

reporting on Ukraine rather than “OSINT” as a generic technical practice. These collectives are motivated by idealism (Müller and Wiik 2023) and humanitarian principles, e.g., by the desire to explain events and help save lives—which is also how their perceived roles differ from professional journalists’ traditional roles. Well-known examples of such value/epistemic orientation include numerous real-time inquiries disproving Russia’s pretext for its invasion of Ukraine or the investigation of war crimes committed by the Russian military in Bucha and other towns near Kyiv (Al-Hlou et al. 2022; Higgins 2022b). These investigations can potentially transform the international legal discourse (Lahmann 2022) and also contribute to “digital memories” for and with survivors with a recognition of the “subjective dimensions” of war (*Syrian Archive n.d.*).

We see this second epistemic community as a mix of journalistic and non-journalistic (not professionally journalistic) actors innovating journalism and thus being involved in it (Müller and Wiik 2023; Ristovska 2022) for four principal reasons. First, they significantly contribute to knowledge production within the conflict-reporting ecosystem. Sandra Ristovska (2022) suggests seeing open-source investigation as a genre of conflict reporting in its own right, yet, the practice is also close to digital investigative journalism (Bjerknes 2022) and humanitarian journalism (Scott, Wright, and Bunce 2023). Second, they co-shape standards of journalistic work. They bring into journalism new sets of tools, practices, technologies, and competencies (Müller and Wiik 2023). A telling example of open-source investigators’ peripheral yet influential position is the number of journalistic awards received by *Bellingcat* (*Awards n.d.*). The open-source actors are believed to enhance the potential of journalism “to reveal hidden facts and produce truth-claims” (Steensen et al. 2022, 2120); Müller and Wiik go as far as to argue that the new open-source actors “may certainly stand as role models for future developments in journalistic practice and science” (Müller and Wiik 2023, 190). Third, the open-source investigation projects and journalism are sometimes performed by the same people, creating personal overlaps (e.g. *The Reckoning Project n.d.*). Fourth, on a meta-level, open-source actors epitomize the constant evolution and porous boundaries of journalism.

The remote and on-the-ground media practitioners embody different levels of spatial (and potentially emotional) distance from and involvement in Ukrainian society, which is why including them in one study can be fruitful. Their different sources of epistemic authority and means of production of journalistic truth allow us to see the meaning of materiality, emotionality, space, and situatedness in journalistic practice (Creech 2017; Moran and Usher 2021; Usher 2019; van der Velden 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen 2022). On the other hand, the epistemic communities of fixers/journalists and digital investigators overlap. First, some of the research participants from the on-the-ground professional journalists’ community have, especially since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, moved to projects documenting, verifying, and archiving digital war crime evidence. Second, their intrinsic position in the war (Ford and Hoskins 2022) and their various proximities to the war (Ahva and Pantti 2014) blur the boundary between media practitioners acquiring knowledge about events from being part of them and gaining knowledge about events from observing them without taking part (cf. Mollerup 2017). The centrality of emotions to the process

(Moran and Usher 2021) and the position of emotions between different kinds of proximity (Ahva and Pantti 2014) and newsgathering practices further stress the importance of their analysis.

Drawing from the work on emotions as embodied knowledge and remote and on-the-ground media practitioners covering conflicts and wars, and focusing on the case of Russo-Ukrainian War, we ask: What is the epistemic value of media practitioners' emotions? How do emotional attachments shape how media professionals and open-source analysts navigate fact-finding and neutrality?

## Methodology

This paper is based on data from two ongoing projects. The first project is focused on the distribution of risks and emotions in conflict reporting, particularly among reporters, fixers, producers, and stringers (Fixers and Stringers 2023). The second project deals with open-source investigation cultures and media practitioners documenting war crimes in Ukraine (Data Publics and the Information Front 2022).

First, we build our argument in this paper on twenty-seven interviews<sup>2</sup> with a variety of local and foreign media professionals and open-source investigators covering the Russo-Ukrainian War. The vast majority of research participants (25) belonged to the first epistemic community of local and foreign journalists, fixers, producers, photographers, stringers, and documentary filmmakers. We have also interviewed two actors involved in open-source (OSINT) analysis and war crime evidence collection and archiving; however, most of the data on the second epistemic community used in this paper comes from online public documents (see below<sup>3</sup>). Most of the interviews (20) were conducted throughout 2021, i.e., before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine; however, we also collected seven additional and new interviews in December, January, and February 2022–2023. Their recruitment was purposeful: we sought to interview journalists, fixers, local producers, and open-source actors involved in covering the Russo-Ukrainian War, started searching for them through existing and newly developing professional networks (including two field trips to Ukraine in 2021 and Warsaw in 2022 and online ethnography—see Kotišová 2023), and continued with snowball sampling. We actively strived for a diverse sample, yet, only eight of the research participants—mainly local producers and fixers—identified as women, the rest as men, which might point to the persisting male dominance of foreign conflict reporting. While the full-scale invasion may seem like a turning point, most on-the-ground actors that we interviewed were involved in covering the war since 2014 or 2015, including routine travels to the frontline, and—judging from later informal contact with them—the invasion intensified yet did not fundamentally alter the nature of their work and work-related challenges. The collection of interviews with the OSINT community is ongoing.

The interviews for the Fixers & Stringers project revolved around the collaboration between reporters and local producers/fixers: its logistics, inequalities in safety and protection, and the research participants' emotional experiences, mental well-being, and coping mechanisms. The Data Publics and the Information Front interviews (informed by work on "Feminist Open Source Investigations;" Dyer and Ivens 2020)

focused on the logistics of open-source investigations or the logistics of war crime evidence collection and archiving, motivations, values behind this work, and the ethics of collaboration between remote investigators/archivers and local verifiers and content providers. The two interview guides overlapped; we also found many overlaps in the research participants' values and ultimate goals, emotional experiences, and sympathy with the war victims. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, pseudonymized, and analyzed using a combined inductive and theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This means that the coding scheme aimed to distill the journalistic affordances of emotions—what emotions do, what actions they allow, and what insights they generate. With these questions in mind, we identified themes such as emotions as a methodological tool, emotions as a motivational force, etc., and coded them accordingly. The outcome of this part of the analysis was clustered into four epistemic affordances<sup>4</sup>, listed under the analytical section. However, we also coded any themes that were emotion-laden or significant in the context of (journalistic) epistemology. This inductive part led us to identify ten additional codes<sup>5</sup>. We use them in the second part of the analysis to further explain how emotional attachments shape how media professionals and open-source analysts navigate fact-finding and neutrality.

Second, to gain more data on open-source investigators beyond the two interviews, the paper draws from a thematic analysis of online public materials, namely websites of six different projects involved in open-source investigations, war crime evidence collection and verification, and archiving of user-generated material: Bellingcat (*Bellingcat* 2023), Dattalion (*Dattalion* n.d.), OSINT Ukraine (*OSINT Ukraine* n.d.), OSINT for Ukraine (*OSINT for Ukraine* n.d.), Ukrainian Archive (*Ukrainian Archive* n.d.), and The Reckoning Project (*The Reckoning Project* n.d.). We analyzed the websites using applicable codes identified during the analysis of interviews<sup>6</sup> and focusing on emotion-laden sections that promised to give us further insights into the research questions: “about” sections, embedded manifestos, sections on values, project goals, and motivations of involved actors. The subsequential sampling of additional activities/representatives of one of the populations (i.e., websites) was theoretical, i.e., driven by (1) the need to better understand the relevance of the emerging codes for the OSINT epistemic community, and thus (2) by the evolving theoretical construct of affective epistemology (Draucker et al. 2007). On the one hand, the difference in the primary source of data on the two epistemic communities—interviews vs. websites—remains one of the main limitations of this paper. On the other hand, using more types of empirical data enabled us to “test” the validity of the codes, categories, and the evolving notion of affective epistemology and thus develop a concept that is dense and grounded in diverse types of data.

Finally, to further add to the theoretical sample, we also looked into supplementary materials such as podcast interviews with actors involved in the open-source projects and with local and foreign journalists covering the Russo-Ukrainian War, online debates with all these media practitioners addressing the war, the book *We Are Bellingcat* (Higgins 2022a)—again using the same codes. This kind of material is by no means exhaustive, its selection was not based on any systematic criteria, and it is simply material that we came across throughout other parts of the projects' design, yet it adds further insights.

## Analysis

The Cartesian heritage dividing the rational and the emotional casts a shadow on emotions' epistemic value within philosophy, social science, and journalism studies (Damasio 1994; Kulbaga and Spencer 2022). But emotions have perhaps an even worse reputation in the journalism industry and practice: "I think that when editors hire people in their team, they prefer robots, machines, who will just be doing their job," said Vira, a journalist/producer, and complained that editors would not hire a freelancer who has links to the story or is traumatized. Mia, a researcher involved in the documentation of war crimes, confirmed that sometimes local investigators need to hand over parts of the analysis to their international counterparts to be trusted and considered less biased. Indeed, some interviewed foreign reporters believed they had to be "careful" with their local collaborators' emotions and potential political agenda.

In what follows, we offer an alternative perspective. First, we list four ways to see the epistemic value of emotions: four epistemic affordances of emotions. Second, we show how emotional attachments shape how media professionals and open-source analysts care for facts and fact-finding, problematize the notion of neutrality, and sometimes point to its potentially harmful consequences.

## The Epistemic Value of Emotions

### Motivational Affordance

Emotions motivate and are motivated. The motivational force of emotions in knowledge-building practices is one of their well-described epistemic affordances (or functions; Brun, Doğuoğlu, and Kuenzle 2008). The compassion for Ukrainian civilians and the passion for finding out and raising awareness about what happens on the ground, and thus contributing to accountability, is also a common motivation to engage in open-source analysis or on-the-ground reporting:

I was really motivated by deep frustration and sorrow. (Janine di Giovanni, founder of *The Reckoning Project* for NPR (Summers et al. 2022))

The data analysts' and archivers' motivations are personal and impersonal. The *OSINT for Ukraine* was founded by Ukrainian students abroad, feeling the need to help their compatriots at home; likewise, *Dattalion* was founded and run by women in Ukraine, "many of them mothers and wives" (*Dattalion* n.d.), supported by international volunteers. Giacomo, an open-source researcher, links his involvement to having a Ukrainian ex-girlfriend and friends in Ukraine. Others are motivated by the "bitter experience" (*The Reckoning Project* n.d.) of witnessing war crimes in Rwanda, Bosnia, Chechnya, or Syria, for which no one was held responsible because of a lack of legally trustworthy evidence. The remote investigators feel the responsibility to change it. For example, *Bellingcat* investigators are "passionate about holding perpetrators to account," and this passion is also seen as a prerequisite to a successful mission (*Trauma Treatment International* 2022).

The on-the-ground journalists, producers, and fixers—some of whom also understand their witnessing and representation of the on-the-ground reality as a

“mission”—are often motivated by more concrete emotions: anger, compassion, revulsion, shock, annoyance, hatred. The foreign reporters with friendships and emotional ties on the ground feel a responsibility to correct a distorted picture of the war that their audiences may have; the local fixers and producers, by comparison, feel the urge to lead their foreign colleagues out of clichés and manipulation. “Caring about stories” (Charles, reporter) is seen as a part of professionalism and quality journalism among both fixers and reporters.

These motivating forces are themselves triggered by (a) things happening on the ground:

The MH17 crash. ... It was touching ... And the absurdity. And the way the separatists have dealt with the situation, not authorizing immediately international authorities to come on the spot. The heat, the bodies disintegrating ... Everything was horrible. And this marked me really, really deeply. (Frans, journalist)

and (b) the many deeply rooted and widely circulating clichés, stereotypes, “pre-imagined dramas,” “fictionalized” reality, sensationalist, “bombastic” (artificially created and staged) or ill-informed stories, propaganda, and manipulation. As the emotions are motivated by (the available knowledge of) reality and its distortion, they work as their indicator:

I am angry that they [Ukrainians] have to go through this. ... I feel anger. And especially when I hear opinions that are just simply so far from reality. (Lukas, reporter)

Identifying this reality, and therefore also its manipulation, a cliché or a stereotype, requires a detailed knowledge of the local context that can be best acquired by on-the-ground experience together with education and reading. Thus, much of the inaccurate reporting that makes people on the ground angry, as the producers Aleks and Artem explained, is caused by the increasing lack of time journalists can spend on the ground, following a general lack of resources in the media industry.

In summary, the entanglement of emotions with motivation has two aspects: emotion work as a motivating force and are motivated themselves, thus working as an indicator of certain qualities of a situation.

### ***Methodological-Epistemological Affordance***

Emotions can serve as a methodological and epistemological tool. Emotions give access to reality:

Your emotion is your eyes and your ears. (Frans)

In an interview for *Czech Radio*, a public-service TV reporter Andreas Papadopoulos graphically described scenes he had witnessed in a field hospital near Bakhmut. The host, Matěj Skalický, reacted:

Host: Well, the description alone makes me a little sick, so I can't even imagine what it's like to see it with your own eyes.

Reporter: Well, it was strange how, except for the soldier's scream, everyone around me was actually calm. It is chilling when you realize that for the doctors, paramedics, and everyone around, it's actually a routine. (Vinohradská 12 2023)

The reporter used the discrepancy between others' habitual emotions and his own non-habitual emotions to identify a significant aspect of the reality: the numbness (or strength) of locals who had been witnessing the horrors of the war for a long time on a daily basis. Similarly, the host pointed to the gap between his "sickness" and the unimaginable difficulty of first-hand witnessing. Such discrepancy has been used as an epistemological tool also in social-scientific research on emotions (Bergman Blix 2015).

Emotions also "open doors" to local sources (Charles). Victoria, a fixer, thinks:

All the Ukrainian reporters that I know are emotionally involved, and it allows them to be better reporters and to produce high-quality material because they have a different connection to their subjects, a different connection to their stories.

This value of the involvement in the local community is very similar to what Wahl-Jorgensen describes in her research on local journalism startups in the UK (Wahl-Jorgensen 2022); thus, the methodological-epistemological affordance is probably relevant beyond war contexts.

### ***Ontological-Narrative Affordance***

Emotions form a part of reality. The on-the-ground journalists recalled experiencing the extreme tension during the Maidan revolution or seeing pieces of children's bodies after the downing of MH17. According to these reporters, there are emotions and affects that are intrinsic to these kinds of situations, and journalists need to feel, express, and "transfer" these affects. In turn, open-source analysts can become distant witnesses of similar affects. Giacomo recalled how the extremely violent videos circulating on Russian Telegram channels had traumatized him before he learned to draw a line between his mission and his personal life.

Since emotions form a part of reality, some media practitioners think emotions are also a necessary attribute of a story: according to Mate, a reporter, stories are made of emotions and context. Artem believes that stories require a moral judgment:

You have to make a decision, internally, ... who's right and wrong in the situation. Otherwise, there is no story.

### ***Innovative-Collaborative Affordance***

Emotions drive epistemological (technological, institutional) innovations and collaboration. Ben, a Belgian open-source activist, developed an automated aggregator, translator, and archive of trustworthy Ukrainian Telegram channels (to amplify them) and Russian propagandist channels (to allow English-speaking audiences to debunk the disinformation). Ben writes:

On the 24th of February, I dropped everything I was doing to support Ukraine with information amplification, sourcing of good information sources, dashboards ... I wanted to find a solution to ease the pain of following the invasion of Ukraine. (*OSINT Ukraine n.d.*)

Likewise, the collective *OSINT for Ukraine* found a non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic institutional alternative to a standard media organization out of a sense of urgency:

Why a collective? Because we believe that at this stage of our work a strong bureaucracy will limit our ability to be able to source information in a flexible, free and timely manner

for our OSINTers. Furthermore, we believe in independence and autonomy, hence we do not require unnecessary restrictions and management on ourselves to do our work to the best of our abilities. (*OSINT for Ukraine n.d.*)

These projects, developed during the war, can assist journalism, or fill its shoes.

Finally, the typical *modus operandi* involves on-site or remote teamwork. It also involves dangerous situations. Therefore, “all these relationships [must be] built on trust to each other” (Emma, producer).

In summary, what is the epistemological value of emotions? How can emotional attachments help experience and report on affairs? As journalists’ “eyes and ears,” emotions sensitize them to things happening on the ground that they can directly witness. Emotions also enable understanding of the local communities and their members’ experiences. Furthermore, there are response-dependent qualities of situations—repugnant, traumatizing, or sickening—that can be known solely through the emotional experiences of people who witness them. Finally, emotions point to established knowledge and evidence, principles, and values, as they are triggered by respecting or disrespecting them. In other words, they are indicators of severe (social) problems: indicators that certain rules have been broken.

### ***“It’s Not Time to Be Neutral:” Connecting to Fact-Finding Bodies***

Yet, having feelings about someone breaking certain rules does not guarantee that (a) the rules are morally correct and (b) the person who feels the emotion has a correct knowledge of whether the rules have actually been broken. Therefore, we proceed to analyze how the epistemic affordances of emotions are entangled with how media practitioners and open-source analysts navigate fact-finding and neutrality.

What stands out from the data is that both the epistemic communities adopt and openly, often emotionally, claim allegiance to truth, facts, and certain values. Concepts emphasized in the documentation are truth, facts, open access to information, transparency, justice, freedom, democracy, global struggle against imperial powers, international law, international humanitarian law, human life, human rights, the Geneva Conventions, the Rome statute, and legal accountability, as opposed to tyranny, genocide, war crimes, and environmental crimes (*Bellingcat 2023; Dattalion n.d.; OSINT for Ukraine n.d.; The Reckoning Project n.d.; Higgins 2022a*). Local and foreign reporters adopt a similar anti-cynical/idealist position. They insist on facts supported by evidence, international law, and critical thinking. These principles can become the basis of a moral judgment:

I work for a newspaper which advocates very clearly and publicly ... human rights, international rights. So, of course, I consider there is something bad going there, ... Moscow is ... doing some shit in the region and burning everyone’s mind with some crazy propaganda. (Pierre, reporter)

I have always been clear that it’s not acceptable that one country, and may it be Russia, a nuclear force, influences the foreign policy and domestic political decisions of [another] country. You cannot do that. ... the role of the media is sort of to be a watchdog. (Lukas)

As the above-mentioned principles (international law, international humanitarian law, etc.) and their directly witnessed (dis)respect (i.e., the reality on the ground) often become the basis of moral judgments, they lead journalists and open-source analysts

to eventually take a side. Charles explains why the journalistic community is perceived to be “on the side of Ukraine:”

I think it's the right thing because, with what happened in Bucha, with civilians and hundreds of them being slaughtered by the Russian soldiers. ... We are actually viewed as being on the side of the good at the moment. In the same way, as you could say, that journalists in the Second World War were also on the side of the good.

However, Charles, as well as Svitlana, Aleks, Lukas, Roland, Frans, Albert, and other journalists and fixers—regardless of their origin and regardless of the timing of their on-the-ground work—stress that it is vital not to close eyes to misbehavior or war crimes committed by the Ukrainian side despite or rather because of, the “warm feelings” towards the country. In any case, the behavior of the warring parties is evaluated using the above-mentioned concepts.

The moral feelings, judgments, and side-taking reflect themselves in the sense of responsibility and, in turn, in discursive and/or physical-material forms of action. One of the common goals of the open-source projects, which also profit from collaboration with on-the-ground journalists, is the collection of war crime evidence for future judicial processes. To this end, *Bellingcat* has launched a whole new Accountability Unit, and *The Reckoning Project* trains journalists in fact-gathering that adheres to international legal standards and in legal literacy. Charles was also asked by his (European) country's public prosecution to testify and provide footage—and he gladly agreed.

Some of the open-source analysts understand their actions as a part of the information level of the war, feel “armed with information and the power of images,” and see information as their “only weapon ... to fight russia” (sic; Sarah Chadzynski and Lesia Donets on *Dattalion* n.d.). The very word “Dattalion” and the use of lower-case “r” in “russia” indicates that the perceived nature of warfare also involves linguistics. Similarly, *The Reckoning Project* seeks to “fight for justice both in the court of public opinion and the courts of law” (*Dattalion* n.d.; *The Reckoning Project* n.d.).

Experiencing the war, and thus becoming a part of it (Ford and Hoskins 2022), thus result in a broader reconsideration of some traditional journalistic norms. “In a situation like that, it's not time to be neutral,” Lukas explains. Frans, energized by a question about journalistic objectivity and neutrality, agrees that “we cannot be neutral. It's totally unrealistic, and it's an illusion ... And that's why the most important thing is facts”, and emphasizes the combination of facts, principles, first-hand witnessing, evidence, knowledge, and critical thinking:

[A] journalist should stick to facts ... I think that a journalist should have some principles, especially in a conflict. It's not being engaged on one side ... I have very warm feelings towards [Ukraine], but also a very critical attitude. But I have some principles which don't shake. Ukraine is not responsible for this war. This war has been caused by Russia. ... I can be critical about everything but I have some axes, like four or five main points that I know happened, and it will not change. So, the war was started by Russia – I know that. The Russian army is fighting a war on the territory of Ukraine. ... I'm not pro-Ukrainian. I'm a journalist of facts. Ukraine has been an independent state for 30 years.

Similarly, Yuriy Halushchak from *Dattalion* describes his motivation to join the projects by saying that “The truth must sound, otherwise it ceases to exist.” Frans also recalls a female celebrity war reporter who came to Donetsk (before the full-scale invasion) and insisted on “neutrality” and “not taking any side.” As a result, she was misled by

the separatists/Russian soldiers and repeated their false narrative about “local coal miners, poor coal miners who have taken a gun [whereas] it was just paramilitaries coming from everywhere ... So, being too neutral can also bring you into swallowing the propaganda of both sides, without questioning it.”

In turn, these alignments also affect journalists’ identities. Lukas, working for several mainstream European media outlets, claims:

If my aim is that international law should be kept and respected, yes, I am an activist. And my tool of action are letters or stories. I think that ... journalists are also activists in this respect. And that’s ok, that’s what they should do, that’s their job.

Di Giovanni, a journalist and a founder of *The Reckoning Project*, says:

I don’t consider myself an activist; I consider myself a human rights defender. (Summers et al. 2022)

Apparently, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War, testing the democratic world’s adherence to its inherent values and journalists’ commitment to truth, a simplistic version of the boundary between journalism and activism is untenable as the field is being broadened and innovated.

## **Discussion: “Part-Time Detective, Part-Time Psychologist”**

Building on twenty-seven interviews with media practitioners reporting on the Russo-Ukrainian War and digital documentation analysis, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions: What is the epistemic value of media practitioners’ emotions? How do emotional attachments shape how media professionals and open-source analysts navigate fact-finding and neutrality?

The analysis illustrates that the Russo-Ukrainian War is a context where (A) emotional attachments can give productive clues in knowledge production, (B) the discourse on impartiality, neutrality, and detachment becomes experienced as problematic and counterproductive, and (C) by being emotionally engaged, the work of journalists is changing as they align with discourses on human rights and justice and legal fact-finding bodies committed to legal objectivity.

### **A) Emotional Attachments Can Give Productive Clues in Knowledge Production**

As the fixer Victoria aptly remarks, her work resembles “part-time detective, part-time psychologist:” She is dealing both with the immensely complex reality and with her foreign colleagues’ ignorance and local survivors’ trauma. Her remark captures tensions in knowledge production that need to be acknowledged in our conceptual frameworks and in our perception of what journalism entails. This paper is an attempt to trigger such a discussion. In reaction to the criticism of the objectivity paradigm (Peters 2011; Wright 2011), the epistemic injustice in conflict reporting (Kotišová 2023), and the suggestions to see emotions as justified and useful (Stupart 2021, 2023), we develop the notion of affective epistemology.

We argue that instead of the traditional segregation of facts from emotional experiences and values (McNair 2017) and theorizing away the role of emotional

attachments, all should be acknowledged as valid parts of knowledge-building practices. We identify four affordances of emotions in knowledge-building practices that we call motivational, methodological-epistemological, ontological-narrative, and innovative-collaborative. First, emotions motivate media practitioners (journalists and non-journalists alike) to pursue fact-finding practices and, in turn, are motivated by on-the-ground events, thus potentially working as their indicator. Second, one's non-habitual emotions, when compared to others' habitual emotions, can help identify significant aspects of situations, and emotional imagination and empathy can also "open doors" to sources. Third, certain emotions can give access to response-dependent qualities of situations (i.e., qualities that can only be recognized by one's emotional response, such as "horrifying" or "amusing"). Fourth, emotions can drive collaborations and innovations. These affordances are not exhaustive, and we hope they will inspire further research elaborating on individual affordances or identifying other affordances.

The insights into affective epistemology, showing that a knower's emotions are potentially epistemically valuable, can inform the larger debate around the shaken media and journalists' epistemic authority (Steiner 2018).

Finally, the notion of affective epistemology also promises to help overcome the disconnect between journalism researchers, media practitioners, and audiences. It shows why we shouldn't take reality, truth, and facts as "the insects of positivism" (Zelizer 2004, 112), exterminate them from analysis, and thus dismiss our research subject(s)' primary goals and vocabulary. Our research participants are in a position where impartiality and emotional detachment are not an option, and, at the same time, their social situatedness defines their commitment to truth-finding.

### ***B) The Discourse on Impartiality, Neutrality, and Detachment Becomes Experienced as Problematic and Counterproductive***

In the second part of the analysis on neutrality and fact-finding, we present the voices of actors who self-reflectively position their affective engagement vis-à-vis understandings of impartiality and neutrality. We show how the media professionals' and open-source analysts' emotional attachments are entangled with knowledge-building practices and fact-finding. The interplay between emotions and facts can result in side-taking and motivate action oriented towards the support of the initial values or the taken side. In practice, this means supporting other fact-finding bodies, such as human rights organizations and legal institutions committed to legal objectivity. These institutions have the authority to establish facts, and they operate on (and enforce) the same values that media practitioners fight for. The idea that journalistic objectivity (if defined as impartiality and detachment) at war is inappropriate and that moral journalism gets closer to the truth is very close to Martin Bell's notion of journalism of attachment (Bell 1998).

### ***C) The Work of Journalists is Changing as They Align with Discourses on Human Rights and Justice and Legal Fact-Finding and Fact-Making Bodies***

The process described under B affects journalists' professional identities: their boundaries, authority, power, but also reputation (as they newly collaborate with those

whom they would typically investigate). An anecdotic example of this stretch is the self-description of *Slidstvo Info*, a Ukrainian investigative news website:

In peacetime, we expose corruption and abuse of Ukrainian officials at all levels ... During the Russo-Ukrainian war, we somewhat shifted the focus of our work—we shoot reports from cities and towns shelled by the Russian military, identify Russian military and Ukrainian collaborators. (Ппо Нас n.d.)

By comparison, the insistent sorting of professional journalism as knowledge production and human rights investigations as activism reifies journalistic boundaries and the somewhat rigid and decontextualized ideological construction of journalistic professionalism. This paper challenges this construction by pointing to media practitioners' affective epistemology and illustrating how, in a warzone, activism and journalism are not necessarily in conflict with one another. However, more research is needed to better understand the combination and points of friction between the journalistic, open-source/digital, and legal logic. Brian McNair writes that the

need [for] some measure of informational validity in the networked, globalised public sphere of the digital age, some way of distinguishing truth from falsity, honest discourse from lies and fabrication or fakery, has never been clearer. (McNair 2017, 1319)

Responding to this need involves being attentive to how investigative communities embedded in and emotionally affected by the war are currently reinventing the standards for validity.

## Notes

1. While the notion of bodies of knowledge is seemingly close to more subjectivist epistemologies, for example to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's perceptual phenomenology, it focuses less on lived experience *per se* and rather sees the embodied experience as a position from, or lens through, which we acquire knowledge.
2. With the exception of one interview, the data was gathered and analyzed by Author 1.
3. The project on OSINT has been accompanied by ethical and data-protection challenges that have caused delay of the collection of interviews.
4. In media studies, affordances are understood as opportunities for or invitation to actions that things present to actors; however, we refer also to its broader psychological meaning of resources that are offered to an individual.
5. Values, manipulation, stereotypes, on-the-ground experience, cynicism, facts/truth, volunteering, redefinition of rigid norms, information warfare, war crime prosecution.
6. Namely: values, facts/truth, personal/affective motivation, information warfare/mission, affect-driven epistemological innovations, compassion/solidarity, bodily engagement, war crime prosecution.

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