Bad Data Better Than No Data? How Journalists Use Numeric Data in Reporting Armed Conflicts

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Wars are phenomena easily captured by numbers and statistics. Yet, these numbers are instrumentally used, contested by warring parties, and difficult to cross-check. How, then, do journalists reporting on armed conflicts use war-related quantitative data, and how do these practices impact armed conflict coverage? This article explores journalists' convoluted relationships with conflict-related numbers and the mechanisms behind their sustained use in journalism. Based on interviews with French and British journalists, findings show that despite a poor command over quantitative data, journalists use them because numbers can generate useful cognitive effects for promulgating information. With the dramatic transformation of the media ecosystem favoring speed over precision, journalists are constantly encouraged to provide numbers even when they do not have the means to verify them. This tends to favor approximations and overreliance on trusted sources, ultimately altering the reliability of information and potentially affecting conflict representations.

Keywords: journalism, numbers, armed conflicts, representation, mediatic ecosystem, justification, professional legitimacy

Since the turn of the millennium, the "datafication" (Van Dijck, 2014, p. 198) of society has provided journalism with a magnitude of new sources of information. Countless quantitative tools have been developed to organize, classify, and transform incommensurable amounts of available data into readable and accessible raw material for mediatic purposes. Wars, which usually constitute an important share of journalistic coverage, are phenomena easily captured by numbers and statistics pertaining to military capabilities, defense expenditures, deaths, and injuries. Many think tanks and political institutions have developed expertise in conflict-related data, often with the aim of providing journalists with numbers they can use for professional purposes. Indeed, "contemporary warfare has brought new rules of engagement for journalists at work in war and conflict zones, which in many cases leads to less presence" on the field (Hoiby & Ottosen, 2017, p. 70), as exemplified by the absolute restriction of access for international journalists in the Gaza strip since October 7, 2023. As such, these initiatives can provide interesting alternative sources for media professionals. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) annually publishes databases relating to arms industries, while The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project collects data on "dates, actors, locations, fatalities, and types of all reported political violence and

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protest events around the world" (ACLED, 2024, Description section). Yet, despite the institutions' assertions about their utility and reliability for media professionals, war-related data are usually subject to intense political controversies, which can prove difficult for journalists to navigate (Bastian, Makhortykh, & Dobber, 2019). Given journalists' own ideals of accuracy on the one hand and the incremental and problematic use of secondary sources on the other hand, how, then, do journalists reporting on armed conflicts use quantitative data and how do these practices impact armed conflict coverage? To explore these dynamics, this article focuses on three research questions:

RQ1:   *How well do journalists know and understand the numbers they are using in war contexts?*

RQ2:   *Why do journalists use numbers in their coverage of conflicts?*

RQ3:   *How do these practices impact armed conflicts coverage?*

Adding to the growing set of academic literature exploring the interconnections between journalism, conflict, and the use of numbers, this article exposes journalists' convoluted relationships with quantitative data from armed conflict databases and the mechanisms behind their sustained uses for journalistic purposes. Quantitative data are considered to be "information that can be counted and measured ("quantified") and given a numeric value" (Ramel & Beaumais, 2023, p. 1). Conversely, armed conflict databases (ACD) refer to any database that furnishes quantitative data on issues related to armed conflicts. Various in origin—academia, initiatives within the European Union (EU) or the United Nations (UN), think tanks—ACDs usually deal with the direct consequences of conflict (deaths, casualties, etc.), the state capacity of belligerent powers (defense expenditures and military capabilities), or the risk of conflict itself (early-warning systems, risk indicators).

Based on interviews conducted with journalists from French and British newsrooms ($N = 17$), this study found that while admitting a certain degree of numeric illiteracy, journalists nonetheless concede non-negligible virtues to numbers, as they can generate useful cognitive effects for promulgating information related to armed conflicts. Typically, numbers can provide a graspable sense of scale, simplify information, and make it accessible for readers: They are striking and easier to remember than long elaborated sentences. This complex relationship has important effects on data usage and conflict coverage. Trapped in a transforming mediatic ecosystem that values the rapidity of publication over precision, journalists covering armed conflicts are increasingly under pressure to break out a story as quickly as possible. In addition, newsrooms, cognizant of data's enticement effects, require their journalists on the ground to provide them with numbers. While data fact-checking in conflict-affected zones may be time-consuming and sometimes impossible, journalists tend to delegate the responsibility for validating these numbers to trusted sources via *rituals of objectivity* (Lawson, 2023) or to use approximations they consider close enough to reality. This allows them to satisfy their newsroom's demand for rapid coverage containing attractive numbers. These practices risk altering the reliability of information, potentially leading to the mislabeling of conflicts and fostering hidden agendas. This article thus offers new insights into the dynamics at work behind journalists' usages of numeric data in war contexts and the impacts provoked by journalistic ecosystem's evolutions on the quality of war reporting.

Numbers, Journalism, Conflicts

The evolution in the use of numbers and statistics for journalistic purposes in the past two decades has not gone unnoticed by academic research (Ahmad, 2016; Best, 2008; Brand, 2008; Harkins & Lugo-Ocando, 2017; Lugo-Ocando & Brandão, 2016; Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2017; Maier, 2002; Van Witsen, 2018, 2020). "Protagonists of the data revolution present the idea that numbers are a distinguished language" (Brandão, 2019, p. 927), and from a journalistic point of view, the sense of neutrality and impartiality rendered by numbers has been "instrumental in the construction of journalistic rhetoric and alleged quest of objectivity" (Brandão, 2019, p. 927). Indeed, an extensive amount of academic production has examined the rise of statistics in the media as a tool for legitimizing the underlying discourse (Battersby, 2016; Eberstadt, 1995; Hacking, 2016; Livingston & Voakes, 2005).

The mechanism behind this aura of legitimacy casted by numeric data is rooted in the positivist belief that because numbers are supposedly the result of scientific processes, they are objective and ballasted from subjective biases. According to Porter (1995), "scientific objectivity thus provides an answer to a moral demand for impartiality and fairness," particularly sought after in contexts of armed conflict where journalists attempt to fashion purely "factual" journalism (p. 8).

However, subsequent research has widely underlined how numbers are thought to be objectives only insofar as they go through a rationalization process that makes them *look* objective (Denis, 2018; Denis & Goëta, 2013; Gitelman, 2013; Porter, 1995). Since the 1980s, political scientists have sought to uncover the "politics of numbers" and the power relations at work behind the elaboration of these seemingly neutral objects (Jencks, 1989; Petersen, 1989). Considered the science of the State (Desrosières, 2008a, 2008b; Stigler, 1986), statistics generally "derive from presuppositions about the object being measured" (Van Witsen & Takahashi, 2021, p. 3), which "conceal their political and theoretical origins and underlying theories of social change and activism. They rely on practices of measurement and counting that are themselves opaque" (Merry, 2011, p. 84). Looking at the practices of data collection, boyd and Crawford (2012) and Gitelman (2013) both show how "data must be conceptualized or imagined as data in the first place, then compiled and cleaned before it can be analyzed (. . .) involving processes that are discipline-specific, with an unavoidably subjective element" (Van Witsen & Takahashi, 2021, p. 3). In fact, to use Gitelman's words, there is no such thing as "raw data" (Gitelman, 2013).

Journalism researchers focusing on conflict reporting have thus scrutinized the different effects that data can produce at different stages of the news production process, exploring the origin of numbers used by journalists and how they use them. Because the theater of war indeed "comprises both a military and a media dimension" (Tasseron, 2023, p. 580) that dialogue instrumentally with one another, numbers related to conflict zones are especially controversial and ambiguous (Spagat, Mack, Cooper, & Kreutz, 2009), especially as access to the battlefield has become more dangerous and restricted (Hoiby & Ottosen, 2017). This is particularly true, for instance, about body counts: Military censorship has continuously distorted the numbers of casualties to manipulate the human cost of war and play on soldiers' morale and public opinion (Andreas & Greenhill, 2011; Fazal, 2014; Gregory, 2022; Norris, 1991). Ahmad (2016) showed how journalists who were prevented from accessing combat zones uncritically repeated inaccurate figures of civilian deaths provided by official sources during the U.S. drone strike campaigns in Pakistan from 2004 to

2015. Tasseron and Lawson (2022) have evidenced how the asymmetry of military force in warfare reflects itself in the asymmetry of information provided by officials to journalists who simply reproduce them. Typically, they showed that "when an article contained a military attack statistic, journalists were much more likely to use an Israeli military source than a military source from Gaza" (Tasseron & Lawson, 2022, p. 249). Both articles uncover how the (mis)use of numbers in conflict zones "reproduce certain narratives but also afford power to certain institutions and actors" (Lawson, 2023, p. 431) and "serves the purpose of reinforcing dominant ideology or existing power" (Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2017, p. 43). This can have concrete policy consequences, as statistics "shape both public and closed-door policy debates" (Best, 2001, p. 135). Ortega and Lawson (2023) demonstrated how "numbers do not just reveal and measure phenomena, but they also serve to portion responsibility to certain actors and organizations, all crucial elements in the memory work of journalism" (p. 1659). As numbers can be used to hierarchize and measure conflicts with one another, they can, in turn, shape the agendas pertaining to the elaboration of active policy to recover historic memory (Ortega & Lawson, 2022).

Understanding Journalists' Malpractices

Given journalism's ideals of rigor, verification, and exactness, how can we make sense of such practices? A recurrent finding among communication scholars points toward journalists' rampant mishandling of statistics and numbers in general (Ahmad, 2016; Brand, 2008; Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2016; Maier, 2003; McConnell, 2014), although the explanatory dynamics behind this tendency remain debated. Numerous studies argue that these weaknesses are first because of a shared absence of training in statistics and numbers (Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2015; Maier, 2002; Wilby, 2007; Yarnall, Johnson, Rinne, & Ranney, 2008). Although this explanation helps understand the source of journalists' illiteracy with numbers, scholars have also tried to disentangle the dynamics at work when journalists are confronted with numbers they do not command. Examining how journalists use statistics when reporting humanitarian crises, Lawson (2023) came to a conclusion similar to that of Ahmad (2016) about the mechanisms behind uncritical uses of secondary sources. Limited in their technical capacity to scrutinize numbers, journalists tend to enact *rituals of objectivity* (Lawson, 2023). These rituals, first identified by Tuchman (1972), allow journalists to rely on "the credibility of their source to stand in for the credibility of the information provided" (Lawson, 2023, p. 442) and then protect themselves from flak or libel (Tuchman, 1972). For Shapiro, Brin, Bedard-Brule, and Mychajlowycz (2013) as well as Van Witsen (2018), official documents are, for instance, among the most coveted sources. But how, then, is this credibility constructed? Building on Godler and Reich's (2017) concept of "evidence of evidence"—second-order evidence that can often stand in for verification—Van Witsen (2020) argues that trust is rooted in past experience (p. 19). Following this study, Lawson (2023) shows that journalists are "more likely to "trust" numerical sources that align with their position on the crisis they covered" (p. 438). For Ahmad (2016), this often leads to a systematic reliance on official sources without questioning their own political agendas, a tendency particularly criticized with the rise of embedded journalism (Allan & Zelizer, 2004).

While current academic research has delved into individual practices to explain how journalists use numeric data in war contexts, relatively little work has examined why journalists covering armed conflicts are encouraged to enact these *rituals of objectivity* and refer to numbers they do not fully command. This research explores the bias at work in the collection and use of conflict-related numbers

for journalistic purposes by examining how journalists relate to war-related numbers in particular and which structural factors actually compel journalists to use numeric data despite their lack of mastery over numbers and statistics.

Methodology

The present analysis is based on a series of interviews (N = 17) conducted in 2021 with French and British journalists. First, the search engine Factiva was used to look for references to ACD in French and British media reporting on armed conflicts between 1989 and 2022. The list of chosen periodicals was built according to their popularity—the largest number of readers in the selected country, excluding tabloids from the selection. Both right-leaning and left-leaning periodicals were included. Then, the journalists who wrote these pieces were identified and contacted. Other journalists were also recruited using the snowball sampling technique.

The journalists eventually interviewed for this study include male and female reporters covering armed conflicts and three data journalists. The selection includes junior and senior French and British reporters working for outlets such as *Le Monde, Libération, La Croix, L'Express, The Guardian, The Times, The Financial Times, The New Statesman, and Reuters*. The list is not exhaustive, as many of them have also worked as freelance journalists for various media outlets. They covered conflict zones such as the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, the Maghreb, and the Balkans. Except for the three data journalists, they all reported directly from the field. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. They were based on a selection of articles each journalist had published to provide context for their answers and to orient the discussion toward recent experiences. Journalists were asked about their training, their self-perceived command of numeric data, their understanding of the value of numeric data when covering an armed conflict, the types of data they use, their cross-checking methods, the sources they trust, their constraints on the field, and their perceptions of the evolution of the role of numbers in conflict coverage.

Interviews were then transcribed and analyzed by the author. No quantitative tool or coding software was used for the interview analysis. Triangulation was used to verify that a statement was confirmed by at least one other interview or more.

Illiteracy and Mistrust: Explaining Journalists' Artlessness With Quantitative Data

How do journalists covering conflicts relate to war-related quantitative data? The journalists interviewed for this study widely expressed mixed feelings about the worth and usefulness of these kinds of data. They generally pointed to two main sources of wariness: their (lack of) training and a critical stance toward the sources of conflict-related data, whichever they are.

Numeric Illiteracy

As observed in previous academic research (Lawson, 2023; McConnell, 2014), the journalists forming the sample mainly come from the fields of humanities and social sciences and have almost never

been trained to use and decipher statistics—even those who have undertaken a journalism training program. A correspondent for *Le Monde* in Burkina Faso vaguely recalled a data journalism option available during her master's degree in journalism. However, the course was mainly about "constructing infographics and remained superficial" (personal communication, October 2021). Often, journalists referred to their (lack of) ability to manipulate numbers as the result of their experience over time, as echoed by a former correspondent for *Reuters* in South Africa: "I've not had any formal training with data at all, so anything that I do is kind of self-taught. I guess I have been learning through osmosis with colleagues and things like that" (personal communication, November 2021). As expressed by a British journalist working for *The Guardian*, they often explicitly referred to their amateurism about data analysis: "I am a complete rank amateur in the sense that I have been doing journalism for about 40 years, but I have never had any training on analyzing data" (personal communication, November 2021).

This is partly because in most newsrooms, according to journalist Peter Wilby, statistical skills or good command of numeric data are not sought after by employers: "literacy is considered essential for reporters—or at least their subeditors—but not numeracy" (Wilby, 2007). However, while a core deontological precept for journalism pertains to the cross-verification of information, this lack of proper training in quantitative data can hinder the journalist's ability to methodologically authenticate numbers' validity or meaning. As a foreign editor for *The Times* puts it, "correctly using data does involve a certain basic understanding—not necessarily high-level math, but of the assumptions that underlie the use of data and statistics" (personal communication, November 2021). This is particularly true for statistics whose numeric expression derives from mathematical mechanisms, such as the use of *p-values* or regression, often debated among statisticians themselves (Wagenmakers et al., 2021). Yet, none of the journalists interviewed have had any specific education on these issues.

Instead of numbers, all the professionals interviewed for this study consider their stories essentially human adventures. Numbers do not express the specificities of certain situations: "Human testimonies are more precious than a dry number and when I am reporting on events, I want to tell people's personal stories" underlined a reporter now working for *France 24* (personal communication, November 2021). "I try to understand why people fight against each other, understand the mechanisms behind the war and numbers do not necessarily allow us to figure out people's intentions," paralleled a war correspondent for *Le Monde* (personal communication, October 2021). Numbers can sometimes be tools, but do not, as many journalists put it, make it possible to "embody" the reality and the facts narrated in the piece. What is valued here is the "literariness" (Dow, 2011, p. 133) of journalism as a narrative exercise in line with the long tradition of war reporters turning into successful novelists such as Joseph Kessel and Ernest Hemingway.

Mistrust in War Context

When asked about the specificities of conflict-related numbers, reporters demonstrated a general mistrust of quantitative analysis and the numbers provided in war contexts. As a journalist responsible for the datacell of the French daily *Le Parisien* puts it:

> In our profession, armed conflicts are, by definition, subjects on which you will be least
> likely to use data. Data is not magic, it is not the truth, it is a raw material, it must be put

in its place, and we should not follow the cretinous cult of numbers. Conflicts are, by definition, in the realm of the occult. (personal communication, September 2021).

A war reporter for the French daily *Libération* also highlighted that in conflict areas,

Military actors feel they need secrecy or opacity in their operations. Given the very nature of the conflict, collecting data is problematic. Secondly, there's a problem of access to the field. Thirdly, propaganda has always been very strong during war. (personal communication, September 2021)

Journalists are perfectly aware of the malleability of numbers and often highlight how they can be subject to politicization in conflict zones more than anywhere else (Bastian et al., 2019). A *Le Monde* correspondent explained how, in Burkina Faso,

The government has taken upon itself to register displaced people, preventing NGOs from doing so. Hence, officially, there's no displaced people, but we can see them everywhere in the streets. The use of numbers is more and more political when it comes to these kinds of topics. (personal communication, October 2021)

Because they are on the ground, war reporters said that they have grown suspicious of numbers provided by institutions after witnessing a discrepancy between what they saw and what was claimed by these institutions. A Middle East correspondent for *The Times* bitterly recalls his experience covering the Syrian civil war:

In the early years of the conflict, the government was putting out its own account of an incident and the opposition putting out their view. You would also have monitors based abroad like the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights which had their own people on the ground, some of them were working with rebel groups that have their own agenda. I went to Damascus, and I also went to the rebel side. I saw that there were definitely failings in the way the Observatory was collecting data. It wasn't totally made up but sometimes the numbers weren't exactly right, the details were opaque. (personal communication, October 2021)

Reflecting on her use of ACLED, another journalist explained that:

ACLED's sources are often a local news story, which for me isn't something I would consider reliable. I know this is combined with the analysts' own work. They've made a personal effort to verify what's happened, but it's unclear what they've done in each case. And it requires quite a lot of trust in the analyst, and you have to make your own judgments on a case-by-case basis (personal communication, October 2021)

On top of the political interests of the warring parties, journalists demonstrated a certain degree of awareness of the methodological bias sometimes at work behind the differences in conflict-related numbers

broadcast by institutions. For instance, with respect to the Syrian death toll, *The Times'* correspondent distinguished between institutions requiring the actual names of victims before releasing death rates after an attack and those relying on what local contacts had said (personal communication, October 2021). The correspondent for *Le Monde* highlighted the difficulties in differentiating the perpetrators of attacks: "Witnesses recount attacks by armed men wearing fatigues, but are they really soldiers? There is more and more violence going all over the place with unidentified armed men, and we don't know if they are soldiers, militias, or terrorists" (personal communication, October 2021).

Overall, because of their "cold" and "dry" nature, numbers cannot compete with the value of testimonies and descriptions, which allow journalists to illustrate what reality looks like with the human eye. Journalists sometimes consider conflict-related numbers as one kind of material for reporting, with their reliability heavily dependent on the source and methodology used to compile them.

Anchoring and Seducing: Why Numbers Remain Valuable for Journalists

Despite a widely shared mistrust of conflict-related numbers, why do journalists still refer to quantitative data in their pieces? In the interviews conducted for this research, they recurrently emphasized what numeric data can bring to their reporting in war zones. Almost paradoxically, they stressed that numbers, although secondary to firsthand narratives and descriptions, were nonetheless important to include, at least minimally. Blurring the lines of the usual division between "data-enthusiasts" and "data-skeptics" (Fast, 2017, p. 709), they indicated two main advantages: They provide a sense of scale and attract readership.

The Anchoring Power of Quantity

While personal accounts collected on the ground constitute the "pulp" of field reporting, isolated stories remain anecdotal if they do not echo a shared experience (Cushion, Lewis, & Callaghan, 2017). As one journalist puts it, numbers, when combined with

> Individual or specific stories, give a reflection of how widespread they are, how common the experience is. Numbers can sometimes be quite general—a displacement figure here, a death toll figure there—and it gives that additional bit of context that helps readers understand how significant the event is. (personal communication, November 2021)

To use another British journalist's words, "journalism is always about marrying the particular to the general. One way to do that is to use data" (personal communication, November 2021). Numbers, referring to quantities, are then conferred a certain "anchoring" (Lawson, 2022) power that roots and substantiates the story being told. As explained by Lawson, journalists thus:

> Position numbers and non-numbers as negotiations of perspective. Qualitative information allows journalists to "zoom in" on the details of the individual, whereas quantitative information means the reporter can 'zoom out' to see how that individual is set within a number of other individuals. (Lawson, 2020, p. 1741)

This capacity of numbers to provide the "bigger picture" necessary to go from the anecdotal to the social trend is deemed so central that a lack thereof could lead to the abandonment of the piece altogether. According to a French reporter who specialized in the Yemeni conflict, for a journalistic piece to be valuable, there must be a "phenomenon that is quantifiable, and you have to be able to explain why. You can't imagine a phenomenon if there isn't a ratio, a percentage. Otherwise, you are under the impression that the phenomenon does not really exist" (personal communication, October 2021). Envoyé spécial for *Liberation*, another journalist confessed to being hesitant to write a piece about Wagner soldiers in Mali:

> I wrote a lot on Mali, I spent a lot of time in Bamako, I have contacts there telling me things, and I could feel that Russians are popular in the streets. This is my perception, but I don't have numbers. And my perception may be biased: it depends on who I spoke to, which neighborhood I hung out in etc. Had there been a reliable study by a polling institute on how the Russian presence is perceived in Mali, I would be less hesitant. (personal communication, September 2021)

Overall, numbers seem to give a form of "legitimacy" to the specific stories told by the reporter by anchoring the singular to a broader, more general, and seemingly more objective context.

The Seductive Power of Numbers

Beyond the usefulness of numbers for journalists themselves, numbers are especially valued by editors because of their melodramatic effects. As exposed by the diplomatic editor for *The Guardian*, the number attached to a story "makes readers think that this story is more important than others and that they should read it. The larger the number, the greater the impact. Otherwise, there will be dramatic words. Numbers are a substitute for dramatic words" (personal communication, October 2021). As Roeh and Feldman (1984) deciphered, "numbers, functioning only in relation to the referents they qualify, will contribute to the emotional atmosphere conveyed by the vocabulary under consideration" (p. 350). In war-related contexts, the lexicon at hand usually refers to emotionally loaded words, such as "death," "injuries," "destructions," "attacks," and so on—only reinforcing the dramatic appeal of this kind of coverage. A French journalist who worked as a Middle East correspondent for many French outlets insisted on how the number of children killed in an attack was always emphasized, "as if children's lives were more important that adult lives" (personal communication, October 2021). Because children's lives are considered more important, the word itself attached to "death" or "injuries" has a stronger dramatic effect on the audience. At a basic level, drama and shocking content have a positive effect on the attractiveness of the information and the quantity of the readership (Garcia Martinez, 2018; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

However, because numbers carry an aura of objectivity (Porter, 1995), newspapers also use them to "contribute to an impression of nothing-but-the-facts journalism" (Roeh & Feldman, 1984, p. 347), reinforced by the straightforwardness of the information given in numeric format. Stories require readers to invest effort in the reading process, while numbers directly jump in their faces. They are easy to grasp, easy to broadcast, and easy to remember because they require less effort to decode (Barthes, 1977). As the diplomatic editor for *The Guardian* pointed out, "any story which has a number in the headline is always

easier to understand. So, there's this sort of kind of incentive to have numbers in stories, particularly" (personal communication, October 2021).

Thus, because of their directness and ability to increase the sensational effect of a story, numbers are a useful tool for editors concerned with both the quality of their reporters' stories in conflict zones and the attractiveness of their content for readership.

Approximation and Overreliance on Trusted Sources Under Time Pressure

Given the discrepancy between journalists' command of numeric data on the one hand and their praised value for journalistic purposes on the other hand, how do journalists' practices with numbers impact armed conflict coverage? In the interviews conducted for this study, journalists highlighted that because of the dramatic transformation of the media ecosystem, which now tends to favor speed over precision, they are constantly encouraged to provide numbers even when they do not have the time or the means to verify them. This tends to favor approximations and overreliance on trusted sources, ultimately altering the reliability of information and potentially affecting conflict representations.

The F-Words: First and Fastest

The prevailing constraint mentioned by journalists about their use of numbers and their ability to cross-check them was almost unanimous: the main problem was time. "We have big constraints in terms of time, because there is this constant race for information," explained a French correspondent in the Middle East (personal communication, October 2021). This was echoed by *The Guardian's* diplomacy editor, who developed the mechanisms behind this "race for information":

> With 24-hour news, the demand to write is much much higher. That job of writing immediately used to be confined to newswires, AP, Reuters, but now there's a compulsion of speed. If you are competing with websites—*The Guardian* is a top British website in the world—the requirement is to make sure that you get the story quite quickly (personal communication, October 2021).

Indeed, in a world where newspapers constantly compete with free access to news, the added value of a story increasingly depends on its clickbait potential. According to Franceschelli (2011), the average age of the news stories reported in a newspaper edition has a negative effect on readership: Readers usually value the speed at which they get the news. According to Cagé, Hervé, and Viaud (2020), while only 32.5% of online content is original, this original content actually represents between 45.4 and 61.4% of online news consumption. Not only do readers reward speed but they also reward original stories. Now, the speed and originality at which news is reported depends on how fast the newspaper gets the story, how quickly it can publish it (Franceschelli, 2011), and how fast the reporter can provide the story. Moreover, one specificity of online coverage is that it can constantly be rewritten, and while print editions simultaneously have daily updates, the online edition can be updated anytime. This ability to correct, update, and follow up quickly on a first publication whose clickbait will prove decisive for the success of the story contributes to favoring speed over precision, especially for numeric data, which carry an important and sought-after sensationalist

effect. This point is proven by Asak and Molale (2020) who wrote on different cases where mainstream news organizations published false information and corrected it at a later point.

According to The *Guardian*'s diplomacy editor, this has a direct impact on the precision of the numbers they use:

> If I have to write three stories a day on different subjects, my ability to check everything is limited. You just get the story out first and then you update it correctly. But the first compulsion is to get the story on your website. Whether the numbers are right or wrong is secondary. (personal communication, October 2021)

As a French journalist covering migration from conflict zones in Europe also puts it, "there is a pressure to get the information as fast as possible, because it will maybe be available for free on social media. And time has a direct effect on meticulosity" (personal communication, November 2021).

As numbers amplify the attractiveness of a story, interviewees mentioned two main effects of this urge to get the story as fast as possible: approximations in numbers and overreliance on trusted sources.

Estimations

Because the main purpose of numbers is to provide a sense of scale, a gross estimation is deemed favorable to nothing at all. As formulated by a French reporter who specialized in Yemen, "whatever it is that you are citing, the data must be close enough to reality" (personal communication, October 2021). For body counts, this reality is often considered to be situated between the claims of the two (or more) warring parties, each having its own incentive to provide an underestimated or overestimated number for propagandistic purposes (Andreas & Greenhill, 2011; David & Rapin, 2018; Fazal, 2014). When they cannot figure out which source is closer to reality, journalists tend to cite both sources, regardless of their overall credibility. As explained by a British correspondent for *The New Statesman,* "If two different organizations or two different governments disagree on a particular figure, then you might say: Well, this one side says this, this one side says that" (personal communication, November 2021). For *Libération's* envoyé spécial in Sahel, a useful technique is to put a range: "if the comparison is tenable, we can put "the number of jihadists estimated between so and so." That's how we get away with it when the numbers are different—by making a range" (personal communication, September 2021). Sometimes, the absence of reliable numbers is such that reporters simply put what they feel best represents the scale of atrocities. Recalling a recent experience while covering the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh from the Armenian side in 2020, *Le Monde's* correspondent explained:

> The government was masking its defeat, even claiming victory. They lied about the number of dead and wounded which were much higher than they wanted to admit. So, for weeks I didn't talk about deaths at all, until I started to get valid testimonies. Then I didn't necessarily give exact figures. It's more like thousands—these are orders of magnitude. That's what I did in Karabakh. (personal communication, October 2021)

Overall, the point is not to be fully precise but to provide the reader with a number that can epitomize a graspable representation of reality.

Overreliance on Trusted Sources

Nonetheless, journalists confessed to often subcontracting the responsibility for validating the numbers to what they considered trusted sources, often international institutional institutions such as the European Union or the United Nations. As explained by *The Guardian's* editor:

> It takes a degree of trust to constantly just recycle the numbers you're given by the UN or by charities. But I'm not sure there's a way around that. You report what this number is, and you describe that this is the UN, and you don't necessarily endorse it yourself. (personal communication, October 2021).

This was echoed by a British journalist working at *The New Statesman:* "To be honest, just citing an external source absolves me of responsibility. If I say: according to Amnesty x, y, z . . . and then Amnesty got it wrong, I am not the one to blame" (personal communication, November 2021), perfectly reiterating the *strategic rituals* identified by Ahmad (2016) and Lawson (2023) among journalists covering humanitarian crises and conflict zones.

In general, trust was exclusively based on reputation, without a precise explanation for why these bodies were considered trustworthy. As one French reporter pointed out, "UNESCO is relatively reliable, it's a large international body" (personal communication, October 2021). In a somewhat tautological approach to sources' credibility, they often claimed that the numbers were reliable because the source was reliable. Their legitimacy was usually derived from their perceived neutrality to the conflict at stake, familiarity with the source (Altheide, 1978; Dunwoody & Ryan, 1987; Reich, 2011), past suitability (Gans, 1979), or, as Lawson puts it, their "track record" (Lawson, 2023, p. 430) in terms of quantitative production. This echoes the literature findings showing that "time-pressure and other constraining factors in newsroom practices may result in publishing a greater volume of materials and data prepared by public relations departments" (Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets, 2022, p. 868). Interestingly, while some mentioned some past overestimations or underestimations by these trusted sources, it did not seem to affect their perceived reliability nor elicit a critical inquiry into the possibility of parochial agendas behind these not-so-precise numbers.

The role and weight of the news agency were also highly emphasized: "Referencing, counting, is a tedious job. At AFP there is a specialized fact-checking unit which takes care of counting. It's impossible for me alone. I delegate some responsibility to them by quoting them" (personal communication, October 2021). And while news agencies were sacrosanct sources by excellence, their limits were also pointed out: "from the moment the AFP God gives a figure, it means that the figure has been verified, which is completely stupid, since the AFP is made up of journalists like us and there are days when they screw up," explained a French correspondent in the Middle East (personal communication, October 2021).

Journalists covering conflict-related stories are thus increasingly under pressure to break out a story as quickly as possible. While data fact-checking may be time-consuming and sometimes even impossible, they tend to delegate the responsibility for validating the numbers they use to trusted sources or use approximations they consider close enough to reality to provide the sense of scale they are looking for. By doing so, they can provide their newsrooms with rapid and attractive stories fitted for the current journalistic ecosystem.

Conclusion

When it comes to numbers, journalists covering armed conflicts could easily be identified as "data-pragmatists." Focusing on journalists' relationships and practices with conflict-related data, this article has demonstrated that although journalists usually lack adequate training to properly evaluate the reliability of quantitative data ACD and other numeric sources provide about armed conflicts, they remain cognizant of numbers' malleability and consider firsthand testimonies as the prime material on which to base their reports. This may indicate a certain form of data skepticism. However, when asked about the value of numbers and their sustained use in conflict reporting, journalists firmly insisted on their positive features: their ability to provide a sense of scale, considered necessary to legitimize the story and its appeal to readers. In an increasingly precarious journalistic ecosystem, numbers' charisma is instrumental for readership maximization strategies undertaken by newsrooms. While this approach does not quite fit the definition of data-optimism, it does point toward a pragmatic outlook on numbers: Although they may camouflage certain private interests and conceal biases at work in their collection and presentation, they nonetheless prove useful and beneficial for the lifecycle of news stories. The structural demand for rapidly available news pieces containing numbers clashes with inherently slow fact-checking processes. This pushes journalists to rely on approximations or to blindly trust a range of sources whose agendas remain unquestioned.

Hence, while scholars focusing on journalism, numbers, and conflicts had previously described, on the one hand, how "time pressure and the perception of competition are both dominant factors that impact the skill performance in verifying information" (Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets, 2022, p. 877) and, on the other hand, the "rituals of objectivity" used by journalists when referring to data they do not fully understand (Ahmad, 2016; Lawson, 2023; Tuchman, 1972), this study bridges the gap between the transformations at play in the media ecosystem and its consequences for day-to-day practices of journalism in conflict zones. Demonstrating the specific worth and values of war-related numeric data, this study provides a structural explanation for the recourse to *rituals of objectivity* by journalists covering armed conflicts. More globally, it helps make sense of the reasons journalists do not always verify the numbers they use in war contexts.

The extent to which these dynamics could undermine news reliability remains to be explored. However, two pervasive effects can be identified. First, to raise public awareness of the horrors of war, journalists often rely on NGOs or humanitarian organizations for numbers (Lawson, 2023). Yet, humanitarian sources also have their own peculiar interest: Because they depend on financial backers, humanitarian organizations use numbers as "strategic assets" toward donors (Beaumais, 2023, p. 31). As NGOs sometimes find themselves competing with each other, and as money bestows importance, from the bottom to the highest levels, "there is a vested interest in keeping funding levels up" (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies [SCSS], 2021, p. 5), and numeric overestimations can appear to be quite useful. The road to hell is

paved with good intentions, and by uncritically using these NGOs' numbers, journalists unconsciously foster the latter's private agendas. Second, in social sciences and in public policy, qualification and definition of conflicts and wars are often linked to numerical thresholds. Typically, determining the appropriate fatality threshold criteria for case selection in the civil war literature has proven contentious (Anderson & Worsnop, 2019). The most used large-N data sets adopt thresholds that vary from 1,000 annual deaths per conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004), to 1,000 cumulative deaths per conflict (Sambanis, 2004), to 25 annual deaths per conflict (Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002). Approximations reported from the ground could then easily lead policy practitioners to label a conflict as a civil war, depending on which threshold is used. Here again, the consequences of conflict and social dynamics' representations could be substantial. While this article has provided new insights about the damaging impacts of the changing journalistic ecosystem and the mechanisms at work behind journalists' usages of war-related quantitative data, more research needs to be undertaken to explore the long-lasting effects of this pragmatist approach to numbers and to journalism as a verification discipline (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). After all, it is the very role of journalism as the "history of the present" that is at stake here.

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