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The “Contrôleuse”: recognising the role of the “Fixer” in academic and media NGO development partnerships

Emma Heywood  and Sue-Ann Harding 

ABSTRACT

Successful NGO development and academic partnerships have, at their core, effective intercultural and multilingual communication and translation practices and processes, including critical recognition of the role of “fixers”, who act as the “interface” between local participants and academic NGO impact-assessment researchers. Examining what we call the “contrôleuse” in development research projects in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, we show the need, as in journalism, to critically interrogate this intermediary role. Identifying and incorporating the role into research funding and design can be a simple and practical contribution towards challenging inequalities, including *contrôleuse* perspectives and increasing participatory impact-assessment and development practices.

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One way in which NGOs (non-governmental organisations) can determine the extent to which they are achieving their goals and working effectively in their target communities is to commission, or work in partnership with, academic researchers from outside the field, who then design and undertake research that aims to quantitatively and qualitatively assess, and subsequently report on, the impact of the NGO’s activities. Translation and communication are indispensable and extensively used components of both this impact-assessment research and the NGO development projects they seek to assess, given the multiple international, intercultural and multilingual dimensions of both.

This paper focuses on the complexities and the ever-broadening scope of processes necessary for this essential translation and communication and on the associated implications for both research and NGO development practices given the comparable dimensions. We draw on previous critical reflection into those translation and communication processes (Heywood and Harding 2020) to interrogate the extent to which we can implement our own recommendations regarding these essential processes. First, we provide the context to the impact-assessment research conducted in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and to the innovative large-scale data collection and analysis methods we used. We also refer to the pilot projects that gave rise to our recommendations. We then describe how, as we attempted to implement these recommendations, the centrality of what we call the *contrôleuse* emerged, an “interface” role between foreign researchers and local participants that we had not fully envisaged and for which we did not even have a name. “Fixer” as a possible term is then considered, tracking ways in which the role of “fixer” has been critically reviewed in both journalism and development studies. Deciding on the term *contrôleuse*, a label which emerged from its particular application in this project, we then present ways in which the acknowledgement of this role was both informed by, and informed, the design and methods of the impact-assessment research project. We provide illustrative examples together with perspectives from the “contrôleuse” in Burkina Faso, ultimately arguing that the naming, recognition and valuing

of this role is central to developing ethically responsible inclusive and participatory practices in academic and development partnerships.

Research context

The focus of this paper results from multiple layers of research, comprising large-scale impact assessments of development projects and small, associated studies investigating the translation that is integral to the larger projects. In 2018–2019, two impact-assessment projects were conducted, in Niger and Mali, on the programming and broadcast discourses of two radio studios and their impact on women's rights and empowerment (Heywood 2020; Heywood and Ivey 2021). The impact assessments were conducted by a UK-based research team commissioned by Fondation Hirondelle, an international Swiss-based media development NGO, which established and runs these radio studios. The impact assessments of the development projects had significant short- and long-term positive effects on the lives of local users and communities and on the methods and procedures used by journalists, media organisations and regulatory bodies (Heywood, Ivey, and Meuter 2020).

A small associated study investigated the translation necessary to those impact assessments (Heywood and Harding 2020). Focusing just on Niger, and drawing on semi-structured interviews with five translators working into French from Fulfuldé, Tamashek, and Zarma-Songhai, we found that the translation commissioning process was hampered by assumptions about what was required, and exacerbated by limited communication between agents (researcher, broker/manager and translators) up and down the communication chain. The paper concluded with recommendations for those working in development, for structuring and facilitating necessary commissioning and translation processes so as to manage expectations and enable more effective communication, while recognising real-life local and international contexts, power differentials, "constraints and affordances" (Marais and Luchner 2018).

The recommendations that emerged from that translation study centred on recognising translation as a core element of rigorous and effective NGO impact-assessment research. Rather than an administrative task added once data are collected, effective translation involves forging and fostering personal and professional networks with local translators. Finding, hiring and commissioning translators through this network requires clear channels of communication; not only so researchers can become familiar with the conditions and constraints under which translators work, in order to better provide clear, appropriate and relevant instructions, but also so that translators are able to ask questions and receive constructive feedback. We also recommended that special attention be paid to the inclusion in these processes of women, who may not be immediately evident in established, often male-dominated, networks.

A subsequent tranche of GCRF funding, awarded for the period 2018–2020, led to a third large-scale impact assessment in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. All three are ODA countries and LMICs. As with the first two research projects mentioned above, this new research also seeks to assess radio output to investigate and compare perceptions of women's rights and empowerment. The aim is to again share the results with Fondation Hirondelle's radio studios – Studio Tamani (Mali), Studio Kalangou (Niger) and Studio Yafa (Burkina Faso) – and to develop, in partnership with Fondation Hirondelle, recommendations that will positively impact on studio and programming policy and practices and contribute to promoting gender equality and women's voices in society. Like Fondation Hirondelle's work, the academic research is international, intercultural and multilingual, requiring UK-based researchers to work closely with local participants in all three countries. These participants comprise three groups: (a) local community radio station managers, who assist in the recruitment of (b) listener respondents and (c) interlingual translators. This project also has an associated side study which forms the focus of this paper.

The small study associated with this third impact-assessment project examines the translation and processing involved in the innovative yet complex methods we are using for large-scale data

collection and analysis. Rather than manually transcribing broadcast output, audio data are analysed using natural language processing, and listener feedback responses are gathered via low-cost WhatsApp surveys (Ullrich 2018; Chen and Neo 2019). Whilst this approach loses the face-to-face intimacy of traditional focus groups, WhatsApp surveys enable high participation numbers (70 WhatsApp groups of 5 radio listeners), cover large areas, including inaccessible conflict zones, and also allow social distancing measures to be maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic. The surveys include both written and voice-recorded questions and responses, promoting greater inclusivity among populations with high illiteracy rates. These written and audio responses are the data for the impact-assessment project.

Translation is an indispensable component of this data collection and analysis. Although UK-funded and managed, French is the working language of the research project (the research team is fluent in French) and the three radio studios, which also broadcast in national languages. Listener feedback (audience responses to nine questions asked on three selected days during four separate months over a 12-month period) is generating multilingual data that includes spoken and written responses in Bambara, Dioula, French, Fulfuldé, Gourmantché, Hausa, Mooré, Songhai, Tamasheq and Zarma-Songhai. Three translator teams of four (one team in each country) are transcribing and translating the data into French, which will then be content analysed using Nvivo.

Recruiting and organising the personnel necessary for the operational success of this complex project could only be realised in close collaboration with people on the ground. This is especially so given our intention to implement our own recommendation that “[t]ranslation should be included at the start of the project design and not as an afterthought” (Heywood and Harding 2020; see also Footitt, Crack, and Tesseur 2018). It quickly became apparent that, with many essential translation tasks incorporated into the design-stage and workflow of the project (e.g. translation of listener instructions and questions and their responses), the organisation and management of those translation tasks was of equal importance to the translation itself. To implement much of the research design locally, we would have to rely on the local (linguistic, cultural and situated) expertise and contacts of an “organiser” in each country, somebody who could act as an “interface” between the researcher and the three groups of participants. This organisational, management task was considered additional to interlingual translation and was allocated its own budget accordingly.

From “fixer” to “contrôleuse”

“Fixer” is a word that comes to mind as a label for this role, both because of our background in Journalism Studies and the research focus on local radio, and also because of our background in Translation Studies, which has long drawn attention to the role of fixers as translators and interpreters in war zones and conflict reporting (Baker 2010). Used extensively in global journalism, with as many definitions for the role as there are tasks they undertake, “fixers” are “the locally-based media workers who help foreign correspondents secure good interviews with sources, safely navigate challenging geographical terrain, [...] interpret the languages with which the correspondents are unfamiliar” (J. Palmer 2019, 1782) and “navigate the cultural contexts with which correspondents are increasingly unfamiliar in the era of parachute journalism” (L. Palmer 2018b, 1331). The fixer is the “interface between the correspondent, the sources, and the site” (L. Palmer 2018a, 321), the person who works alongside the foreign reporter to navigate and interpret so as to facilitate and enable, “translating on both literal [linguistic] and metaphorical levels” (L. Palmer 2018b, 1344). Long a common practice, but increasingly so since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the reliance on fixers, the nature of their contributions to news production and the often complicated professional, personal and power relations between reporter and fixer are at last attracting scholarly and industry attention, particularly regarding issues of safety, security, trust, reliability, bias, manipulation, visibility and accreditation (Jerry Palmer and Fontan 2007).

Originally a fairly dismissive, even derogatory term, there is evidence that the status and recognition of the role has risen since it first began attracting scholarly and journalistic attention (Murrell

2010). There is also a growing body of work drawing on interviews with (people who self-identify as) fixers to examine long-standing assumptions about the role and agency of local news workers in news production and “to start making sense of their work largely from their own perspectives and perceptions” (Mitra and Paterson 2019, 1674–1675). Even as tensions, discrepancies and inequalities between local and distant journalistic practices persist (Plaut and Peter 2019; Jukes 2019), the potential for those very differences to contribute to more dialogic, mutually collaborative and ethical global newsmaking practices is beginning to be recognised and advocated (Mitra and Paterson 2019).

Critical recognition of the role of fixers as the “interface” between international NGOs and their target communities and, by extension, between academic development impact-assessment researchers and local participants is also gathering pace. The agency and expertise of local NGO communications staff members, for example, and ways in which they both contribute to, and are sidelined by, NGO news production has several parallels with fixers in global journalism and is beginning to be critiqued (Isharaza 2019; Wright 2018). The reliance on intermediaries, mediators, brokers and development agents is widely acknowledged (Neubert 1996; de Sardan 2005; Lewis and Mosse 2006), with the various labels for these crucial roles, suggesting that the same issues of agency, security, visibility and accreditation, which have become increasingly critiqued in global journalism, are also being grappled with in development studies and related intercultural academic research. Eyben, for example, has looked extensively at the relationships involved in (the complex systems of) aid and development (2006), Smirl has extended this to critique the spatial and material dimensions of those relationships (2015), and debates continue about the positionality of “local actors”, “local aid workers” and “national humanitarians” (Slim 2020). We argue that by acknowledging the essential, ubiquitous and normally invisible role of fixers in academic and international development partnerships we can, as in journalism, work to recognise it, critically interrogate it, challenge inequalities, include the perspectives of fixers, and respond to the potential to create more participatory practices (Delgado Luchner 2020). The trajectory of critical scholarship on the role of the fixer in global journalism, from recognising and problematising the role to a growing acknowledgement of fixer perspectives and the benefits of equitable and ethical practices, is one that can also be made in academic and NGO development partnerships, especially as impact assessments by academics and independent bodies are increasingly becoming integral parts of development projects and a field of research in their own right (Noske-Turner 2017). It is to this growing body of self-reflexive research, inclusive of local research brokers, assistants and associates, that this paper adds (Schiltz and Büscher 2018; Reddy et al. 2019; Fertaly and Fluri 2019).

It would appear paradoxical then, that, for the organiser of the translators and translation processes central to our research, we decided not on the term “fixer” but on “contrôleuse” – a term which emerged from, and was used in, this project. Determining a label for the many tasks that the intermediary would have to perform was challenging. Interlingual translation and administration experience and expertise were key, but so were high degrees of agency, local cultural and geographical knowledge, as well as mediation, negotiation, supervision and problem-solving skills. The French term for “fixer” – *quelqu'un.e qui règle les problèmes* [someone who solves problems] – carries negative connotations and suggests a reactive rather than the driving role that we wanted to emphasise. Our solution, as a team, was to coin the word *contrôleuse*, from *control* + *French feminine ending*, a word with origins in both English and French and specific to this project. Whilst *contrôleuse* can be translated into English as “inspector”, “assessor”, or “controller”, our codeswitching use of this neologism is intended to reflect the multilingualism of the project and the countries in which we are working, emphasise the importance of female participation in the impact-assessment research and development projects and draw attention to the centrality and complexities of the role itself. Whilst we make no claims to the term’s generalisability, it is the recognition of the concept of the role which interests us, together with the role’s specific nature which is distinguished as the intermediary role between those on the

ground and academic researchers, rather than between those on the ground and either journalists (e.g. *fixers*) or development workers (e.g. *development brokers*).

The role of the “*contrôleuse*”

By following our own recommendation to embed translation into the design stages of the project, specifications for the *contrôleuse* role were written into the second-phase funding application. These were an MA degree in a related subject, computer and social media literacy, knowledge of at least one of the national languages in addition to French and the ability to translate and have some experiential insight into the translation process. Radio Studio managers in each country created a pool of applicants (with the relevant native language expertise and local qualifications), who were then interviewed and selected by the UK researcher during field visits. In line with our own recommendation to “develop clear and effective feedback loops” and “consider working conditions and constraints of translators”, additional time was incorporated into the research planning stages to get to know and train each *contrôleuse*. The purpose of these preparatory sessions was to ensure that each *contrôleuse* not only fully understood the aims of the impact-assessment research, but that she also had the opportunity to explain any potential local difficulties or obstacles unforeseen by the UK research team. The sessions were valuable; through them, each *contrôleuse* became from the outset a recognised part of the team, equally able to develop and contribute her voice and skills.

There were several reasons why we sought to employ women for the role of *contrôleuse* in each country. Most obvious were the concerns of the impact-assessment research (radio’s impact on women’s empowerment) and the associated desire to promote women’s opportunities if possible. Existing Studio in-house translators were recruited for the research in Mali (3 women: Songhai, Bambara and Tamasheq; and 1 man: Fulfuldé) and Burkina Faso (2 women: Dioula and Gourmantché; and 2 men: Mooré and Fulfuldé). No assessment of their language skills was required as they were recommended by the Studios. In Niger we were reliant on the networks of the *contrôleuse* to recruit recommended local translators (2 men: Hausa and Zarma-Songhai; and 2 women: Fulfuldé and Tamasheq). In all cases, it was important to have a female *contrôleuse* who would be able to reach “local, female capacity” when recruiting and developing a local pool of female translators, an important aspect of our recommendation to “[i]ncorporate into the project design stages for translator selection and the development of networks for future work” (Heywood and Harding 2020). We also asked female journalists from Studio Yafa (Burkina Faso) to voice the WhatsApp messages (for non-literate listeners), a decision made because of the project’s emphasis on women’s empowerment.

An initial task for each *contrôleuse* was to forge links with the translators and act as the intermediary between interlingual translator teams and the research team regarding negotiating pay rates, deciding on and managing remote payment systems, ensuring contracts were signed and relaying information and documents (ethics forms, a demographic survey) so as to satisfy the requirements of both the UK researchers (and funders) and the translators. Each *contrôleuse* was also given the initial listener-survey questions (in French) and was responsible for sending these to her four translators and ensuring they understood the assignment. In Burkina Faso (at a more advanced research stage, see below), an informal (WhatsApp) discussion between the researcher, *contrôleuse* and the 4 translators enabled us to respond to two more of our recommendations:

Firstly, researchers must question and be able to clearly articulate what information they want from the foreign language material and what they are using it for. Secondly, give clear instructions to translators. Discuss the linguistic features, purposes and audiences of the source texts; explain the purpose and audience of the target texts. (Heywood and Harding 2020)

This discussion helped everyone better understand not only the project but also how to approach the translation tasks. The focus was on text length, given that it would be sent as a WhatsApp written

or audio message; on the avoidance of jargon and the need for lay comprehensibility, especially in terms of favouring national language over French terms; and on the freedom to ask questions if unsure and to discuss uncertainties with colleagues.

Another of the *contrôleuses*' task was to liaise with local radio station managers, in French or national languages, to set up the WhatsApp listener feedback groups. Once the groups were created, the *contrôleuse* would send and receive questions and responses to and from the groups, organise the translations of the data as necessary, and arrange for phone credit reimbursement to be made to the listeners, translators and radio managers. A final important task was managing the translated data and ensuring that the right people, be they translators, respondents, or researchers, received them at the right point in the data-gathering cycle (to be repeated 4 times in each of the three countries). All these tasks were essential to ensure the translation components of the project, crucial to rigorous data collection, could be appropriately and timely completed. It was clear, already in the pre-stages of data-gathering, that the scope of the translation task begins before, and ends long after, any "interlingual translation" work, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Thus, each *contrôleuse* needed to liaise with, and mediate between, the UK researchers, the Fondation Hironde radio station managers, the interlingual translator teams and radio listener respondents. Provided with a mobile phone, WIFI access and phone credit to facilitate contact with the researchers and participants, and a temporary user account to upload data directly to the research project shared drive, each *contrôleuse* would be, simultaneously, broker, translator, translator team manager and research team member. In an effort to "develop clear and effective feedback loops" (Heywood and Harding 2020), as we had recommended, it was essential that, as instigated in the training sessions,

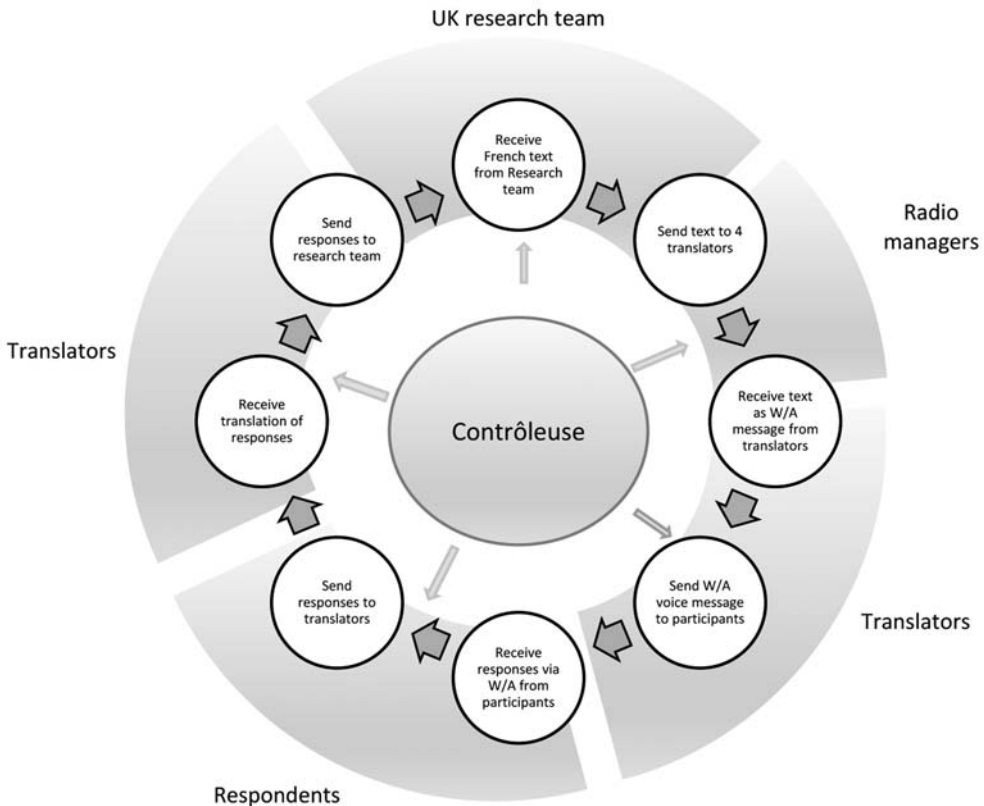


Figure 1. Scope of the translation task and the centrality of the *contrôleuse* in each data-gathering cycle as the interface between researchers and participants (radio managers, translators and respondents).

the *contrôleuse* felt part of the team throughout the research process and could at any time and in regular meetings, raise questions and concerns and offer suggestions and improvements, (as she did, see below). The process then, although highly structured so as to manage its complexity, would not be hierarchical but would endeavour to ensure the participatory collaboration of the *contrôleuse*.

Clearly then, while organisational, project-management and linguistic skills were central to the job description and selection of the *contrôleuse*, the role is far more than purely administrative, supervisory or that of an interlingual translator/interpreter (often merged in multilingual societies). The role, *emerging* from our efforts to implement our own recommendations regarding interlingual translation, requires an interlingual and intercultural negotiator, mediator, intermediary and facilitator, not unlike the fixer in global journalism. Furthermore, as with the trajectory of critical scholarship on the role of the fixer, also emerging is the ethical imperative to recognise, name, value and credit that role.

Examples from the field: additional skills of the “*contrôleuse*”

Although we planned to start the research process simultaneously in the three countries, this proved not to be possible; Niger was delayed by COVID-19 and Mali by parliamentary elections held in March and April 2020. We therefore focus on Burkina Faso as the research process is most advanced there. Although the Burkina Faso part of the project is the smallest, with only 70 participants recruited through 14 community radio stations, it is still characterised by the logistical, organisational, multilingual and translational challenges described above. The working language of each WhatsApp group is the national language dominant in the group’s geographical area, even if this is not the first language of all individual participants. The 14 WhatsApp groups operate in Fulfuldé, Mooré and Dioula, and respondents sometimes also reply in French, reflecting both the region’s multilingual nature and higher education levels in younger participants. Although, in Burkina Faso, as mentioned above, the *contrôleuse* was not directly involved in the translator recruitment process, her subsequent negotiating skills over pay rates – the in-house translators were essentially freelancing for the research project – were essential. Ensuring acceptable working conditions for translators was one of our recommendations and we were fortunate in that the conditions and constraints of the Burkina Faso translators’ working environment were such that the radio studios allowed them to work on freelance projects such as ours whilst still having access to their everyday office space, computers and Wi-Fi.

Whilst we had identified specific skills that we thought necessary for the *contrôleuse* position (described above), after several weeks in the role, the Burkinabe *contrôleuse* identified additional important qualities. For us, administrative, managerial and translation skills were important; we had funding deadlines to meet in terms of research cycles when data needed to be translated, distributed, collected and processed. However, for the Burkinabe *contrôleuse*, what was also important was *how* to accomplish these tasks when liaising with diverse sets of participants. For her, multilingualism and interpersonal skills were indispensable.

Collecting data, for example, proved to be more than simply sending out and receiving information, questions and responses. Already a complex process involving several sequential and interdependent steps (as illustrated by the smaller circles in [Figure 1](#)), any errors or delays would affect subsequent stages. The ability to communicate effectively with all involved was facilitated by the *contrôleuse*’s knowledge of several national languages. As she herself expressed it,

Just the fact that I can express myself in the mother tongue of the person listening to me automatically creates a feeling of confidence on their part and predisposes them to pay attention to me. In my opinion, speaking several languages gives a positive image of a person, the image of an open and free minded person, an image that makes the local receiver feel confident. Speaking the local language enabled me to better communicate with the other local study collaborators.¹

The Burkinabe *contrôleuse* was able to express herself confidently to participants in their language, encouraging them, in turn, to acknowledge the validity of her job and heed her requests. Through

her multilingualism, the role of the *contrôleuse* gained status, with the resulting mutual appreciation and recognition proving useful in effective personal communication and the accomplishment of her tasks.

The confidence that came with being able to converse in national languages led to positive interpersonal interactions, facilitating the *contrôleuse*'s task and benefiting the research project. These encounters were underpinned not only by her multilingualism, but also by her cultural awareness and interpersonal skills. The *contrôleuse* was able to cultivate appropriate levels of courtesy with people from different age groups and of different social standing, respect subtle social conventions and levels of seniority, and be responsive, as she recalls – “*Nous avons été à l'écoute et disponible à toute heure*” [we were attentive and available at any hour of the day] – all of which would have been difficult for the UK researchers to achieve. Ensuring that WhatsApp messages were sent on time by respondents, for example, required more than simply sending a reminder, particularly regarding older listeners who might not have fully understood initial instructions. “Thanks to my understanding about the way of thinking of some people older than me,” she said,

I was able to subtly ask them to answer the questions they forgot, or ask those who had answered *en état d'ivresse* [in a state of drunkenness] to repeat the answers, for example, without putting pressure on them or making them feel inadequate.

The combination of language and cultural awareness manifested as interpersonal skills was further enhanced by *contrôleuse*'s associated local (geographic and cultural) knowledge. In order to ensure work was both distributed and collected on time for the project, the *contrôleuse*'s management of tasks also took into account local customs and routines, out of convenience for the respondents and to encourage them to complete the surveys. For example, she said:

I also know that in the countryside, markets are usually held on Saturdays, so I joke with them that no response means no pay, and so no market on Saturdays, (just for fun but at the same time to challenge them to respond, especially the latecomers.)

The *contrôleuse* was also able to draw on existing local networks to overcome potentially damaging delays. One of her tasks was to meet with radio station managers, explain the project and work together to recruit the necessary listener respondents. When one radio manager failed to respond, the *contrôleuse* used her knowledge of the project's requirements and experience gained from working with other radio managers to liaise with a local resident who was able to assist in recruiting the respondents. “So I did a survey and an acquaintance volunteered”, she explains, “and I transferred the forms to him to be filled out by the people he had identified on the ground. And that was a problem solved.” The *contrôleuse* therefore developed confidence in her own ability to take decisions, perceiving herself increasingly to be a trusted and responsible member of the team.

More complex interactions often involved money and required not only negotiation and problem-solving skills but also drew on these same multilingual and interpersonal skills and associated confidence. When the radio managers, for example, requested additional phone credit, the *contrôleuse* mediated between the research team and the managers and the request was quickly granted. Similarly, the process of how payments could be made to the various participant groups was promptly organised thanks to the *contrôleuse*, who suggested Orangepay as an obvious, simple and easy-to-use payment solution. A system allowing online payments via mobile phones, Orangepay is widely used and accepted in Burkina Faso, but that it could be used in this way in this project was initially unknown to the UK researchers.

Calculating and negotiating translation rates also proved challenging. The data-gathering method was far from straightforward, involving three national languages and a combination of text and voice messages of varying lengths. Because we could not know in advance the proportion of text and voice messages, nor which language respondents would use, a precise delineation of translators' tasks was impossible to define. The researchers were aware that whilst we wanted to

respect and recognise the professionalism of the translators, we also had to remain within budget. The *contrôleuse* played a central role here by not only explaining the complexities of the data collection process to the translators (requiring their trust), but also by explaining various translation challenges to the researchers (requiring ours). “The time it takes to translate depends on the language to be translated,” she said, for example.

There are languages where, for the translation of a single French sentence, you have to use at least four sentences in the *langue locale*, simply because there is no specific term to designate an element of the sentence written in French.

Together, we were able to negotiate what were eventually agreed to be fair rates for these as yet unknown amounts, formats and even languages of work. The *contrôleuse* was in Ouagadougou, so was able to facilitate face-to-face meetings with the translators and provide the crucial, interpersonal connection between the translators in Burkina Faso and the researchers in the UK. Had it not been for her physical presence and her multilingual, social, cultural and interpersonal skills (as discussed above), the difficulties and potential misunderstandings encountered in these discussions could well have led to mistrust between researchers and translators. Instead, the process highlighted the levels of trust involved and the professionalism required from, and exhibited by, the *contrôleuse*.

Conveying the ethical requirements of the UK researchers and funders to translators and respondents also needed careful consideration. The researchers considered adherence to ethical standards essential; according to funding and institutional policy, the research could not commence without all ethics forms understood and signed (orally or in writing). Participants saw these procedures as pointless and unnecessary. The *contrôleuse* mediated between these two positions in a way that the UK researchers would struggle to do. She ensured that not only was this seemingly futile task completed by the participants but that the spirit of the research ethical requirements was incorporated throughout all stages of the project in which she was involved, particularly regarding the anonymity of respondents. It was through the multilingual and interpersonal skills of the *contrôleuse* that participants did not perceive the exercise as meaningless, performed perfunctorily, but that it was for their protection. Again, the *contrôleuse* proved highly skilful as a cultural mediator, acting as an effective interface between the researchers and the participants.

What we hadn't anticipated

Such ease of relations did not always fully extend, according to the *contrôleuse*, to the challenges of working with academics and, after asking for her perspective on her role, it became apparent that cultural differences manifested in unexpected places. While, as researchers, we had been thinking of the challenges of intercultural communication traversing countries and/or languages, the *contrôleuse* thought rather in terms of academic and non-academic cultures. That is, whilst the confidence of multilingualism, social and interpersonal skills enabled the *contrôleuse* to fulfil her tasks with diverse sets of participants in a variety of social settings (including people's homes) with relative ease, when asked about working in a professional academic setting (with the researchers or with other academics on previous projects), the *contrôleuse* expressed, for the first time, feeling some insecurity and a need to overcompensate:

It's like we have to be up to the task, and do everything to be up to date, especially in the news, we have to research the themes that the academics are working on so that we can be on the same level as them. This means you have to read a lot and be really informed.

Whilst these words confirm the fact that universities have long been seen as somewhat opaque and exclusionary, they also highlight the practical and sometimes unexpected implications of such perceptions. We realised we had not given sufficient consideration to cultural differences between academics and “non-academics”, both perceived and structural, when developing the role of *contrôleuse*. Our efforts to budget for, train, inform, develop a personal rapport and establish clear

communication and effective feedback loops with the *contrôleuse* had not revealed our professional blindspot, our own position as “academics”. The *contrôleuse*’s perceived need, and efforts to, become, as she expressed it, a “mini-chercheuse” [mini-researcher] suggests a level of over-compensation that could either be personally beneficial (because she enjoys the intellectual stimulation and opportunities for growth) or detrimental (because she has less time to perform her allocated tasks and lacks confidence in her own intellectual abilities). To avoid the latter, while not prohibiting the former, a clear demarcation of roles, tasks and expectations needs to be included in the research design. This clarity would promote team member confidence, especially for those who see themselves as new to academic research culture and foster trust between team members. Team members can be confident they are acting within well-defined role limits and trust that everybody knows what everybody needs to do.

In addition, the *contrôleuse*’s mediatory negotiations with the translators made us, the researchers, (belatedly) aware that greater inclusion as a more informed team member from the outset was desirable. The *contrôleuse*, for example, did not know the details of the budget but was still expected to negotiate pay with the translators, leaving her sometimes in an awkward and uninformed position. “I suggest” she said, “involving the *contrôleuse* in preparing the per diem budgets for radio managers, translators and participants, since she is the one in the field and is most often asked to justify the amounts of per diem to the people concerned.”

Concluding remarks

This article critically reflects on our efforts to implement our own recommendations regarding translation as a core element of rigorous and effective NGO impact-assessment research and therefore is of particular relevance to NGO-academic partnerships in development research. These efforts revealed the extent to which the scope of the translation task begins before, and ends long after, any “interlingual translation” work. The translation tasks, indispensable components of the innovative methods for large-scale data collection and analysis, require extensive participant organisation and interaction. Consequently, the role of an intermediary, the essential “interface” between the various participants in the project and the research team, emerged. As critical recognition of a similar role – the “fixer” – in journalism and translation studies, is leading to changes in practice, there is evidence that critical recognition of the role in development studies and the growing field of related impact-assessment research (which has become an integral part of NGO funding applications) is beginning to follow suit. Drawing from our experience of designing and implementing a complex, international, intercultural and multilingual impact-assessment research project in Mali, Niger and particularly Burkina Faso, we aim to contribute to this trend and highlight the need, as in journalism, to critically interrogate the normally invisible role of what we call the “*contrôleuse*”.

Although limited by its focus on a single case, this article nevertheless demonstrates the extent to which the *contrôleuse* can be central to successfully implementing development impact-assessment research. Seemingly straightforward at the design stage of the research project, we had thought of the role as an important, but small, cog in a much larger wheel and had specified and prioritised administrative, managerial and linguistic skills when recruiting applicants. These skills were important, but from the *contrôleuse*’s perspective, the way these skills were utilised and her emphasis on locally-nuanced interpersonal communication and associated confidence, none of which we had overtly considered, were perhaps even more important for the success of the research. Multilingualism was not only about linguistic knowledge and translation expertise, but about establishing personal rapport and mutual respect. For the Burkinabe *contrôleuse*, her ability to speak in the participants’ languages, to express appropriate social sensitivity and humour with different age and social groups, to bring local knowledge to the mediation of conflicting demands around ethical standards, budget constraints and translators’ workload and pay, resulted in mutual trust and high levels of participant investment and compliance.

Furthermore, rather than thinking in terms of national or linguistic differences, the *contrôleuse*'s perspective alerted us to consider the way academics might be perceived by non-academic partners. Our efforts to budget for, train, inform, develop a personal rapport and establish clear communication and effective feedback loops with the *contrôleuse* had not exposed our own, potentially perceived as threatening, position as “academics”. Nor had we anticipated the amount of information the *contrôleuse* might consider appropriate for her tasks. Diffusing anxieties about academic expectations and building confidence in, and awareness of, each person's defined role within the team might, in future, mitigate against these blindspots.

By considering the Burkinabe *contrôleuse*'s perspectives on her role, her agency and the benefits her unanticipated skills brought to the project, we recognise the extent to which the role of the *contrôleuse*, emerging from our efforts to embed into research design a broad concept of translation that takes into account people and process, far exceeds the role we first envisaged. More than a translation manager, more than a broker, more than a research associate, whatever term it is given, the multifaceted role merits labelling, recognising and critiquing, just as the “fixer” has been in journalism. The term must also be acceptable to the individual fulfilling the role and be an appropriate reflection of the role's clearly defined expectations; an inadequate, inaccurate or disrespectful label will only serve to undermine the role and the confidence of, and in, the individual. Given the growth in NGO-academic partnerships and the impact-assessment research increasingly required by NGO funders, it is important to recognise not only the role's existence, but that it will expand and alter depending on contexts. Recognition of the role of *contrôleuse* must serve to value and enable the work not to limit and constrain it. Identifying and incorporating the role into research funding and design can be a simple and practical contribution towards challenging inequalities and including *contrôleuse*'s perspectives, thus responding to the need to foreground and increase participatory impact-assessment and development practices.

Note

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