Pragmatic Objectivity in Practice: Reading The Globe and Mail Columns of Christie Blatchford

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ABSTRACT Pragmatic objectivity, the normative theory set forth in Stephen Ward’s The Invention of Journalism Ethics, argues that good journalism requires the “diligent application of fallible methods over time” (2004, p. 292). This article reads The Globe and Mail columns of Christie Blatchford as a practical example of pragmatic objectivity. Blending complex ethical appeals with straightforward reportage, these columns constitute a kind of hybrid genre, which gives Blatchford scope to construct herself as reliable even as she concedes that reportorial objectivity in the traditional sense is impossible. Her writing on Canada’s mission in Afghanistan, however, is problematic. Aware that being embedded with the military risks undermining her rhetorical ethos, Blatchford nonetheless seems unable to turn the resources of the hybrid genre to her advantage.

KEYWORDS Christie Blatchford; Journalism

Defined as an unbiased, purely factual approach to reporting, “journalistic objectivity” has come to seem an almost quaint notion. Critiques of its status as an epistemic and ethical standard (Ettema & Glasser, 1998; Parenti, 1993; Tuchman, 1978)

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and accounts of its ideological roots (Banning, 1999; McChesney, 2004; Mindich, 1998; Schiller, 1981) are by now legion. The retreat from objectivity has not been restricted to the academy. It appears that practicing journalists have taken a similar turn (Friedman, Dunwoody, & Rogers, 1999). When one of Canada’s national newspapers (the more conservative of the two, it is worth adding) publishes a column entitled “Objective’ journalism? There’s no such thing” (Fulford, 2004), it seems safe to conclude that the notion has few defenders left.

Yet we must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. As Stephen Ward has argued, repeatedly and compellingly (Murphy, Ward, & Donovan, 2006; Ward, 2004, 2005, 2007), journalism would do well to redefine rather than reject the notion of objectivity. The old “perfectionist” standard—Ward terms it “traditional objectivity”—may be indefensible, but journalists still need strong “normative guidance” (2004, p. 263) in their quest for factually reliable, ethically responsible reporting. Without such a guide it is all too easy, in the heat of the moment and the buzzing, booming confusion of pluralism and globalization, to favour parochial interests over “the truth-telling principle” (Murphy, Ward, & Donovan, 2006, p. 323). Ward (2004) recommends “pragmatic objectivity,” grounded in an attitude of “imperfectionism.” Journalists already have at their disposal useful, if fallible, methods of inquiry. If they approach truth-telling as a never-ending, imperfect process that requires interpretation and develops phronesis even as it employs these methods—in short, if they approach truth-telling as “the diligent application of fallible methods over time” (p. 292)—they can, in Ward’s view, fulfill their “contractual duty” of “communicating to the public for the public” (p. 26; original emphasis).

In our view, the theory of pragmatic objectivity constitutes a promising epistemic and ethical guide for journalism. Nonetheless, as Ward himself acknowledges, it has not yet been measured against actual practices. We still need specific studies—of journalists, newspaper articles, and even media organizations—in order to gauge the practicability of Ward’s theory and, perhaps, to revise some of its tenets. This article hopes to begin such an endeavour.

Our specific focus is on the rhetoric of Christie Blatchford, a reporter and columnist whose career spans more than three decades. For the past ten years, she has been best known for her columns in two national newspapers, the National Post and The Globe and Mail, where she writes frequently about such topics as crime, politics, terrorism, and war. Our interest in Blatchford stems partly from the fact that she is a prominent, prolific journalist dealing with important public issues, and in Canada there is a dearth of scholarly work on such writers. But for a number of reasons, we also consider her work particularly relevant to an assessment of Ward’s theory. Engaged with complex, value-laden issues and acutely aware of the postmodern conundrum (though the adjective is one she would likely disparage), Blatchford has neither retreated to the safe, ostensibly objective ground of pure fact nor plunged into the subjective indulgence of pure value. Her columns—a combination of reportage, interpretation, and personal reference—are the result of what seems to us to be a fascinating, if sometimes flawed search for a form and method that can address the new complexities facing contemporary journalists. That these columns have elicited both accolades and antagonisms is
perhaps to be expected, given the volatile nature of her topics and what Ward (2004) calls the “messy practice of journalism in the real world” (p. 35).

The following analysis is in four parts. The first explains Ward’s theory by unpacking the phrase, “the diligent application of fallible methods over time.” In the second, we read a wide range of Blatchford’s *Globe and Mail* columns in light of this phrase, seeing them as a working alternative to traditional objectivity. Our main argument is that these columns constitute a hybrid that blends two functions. Over time, one function, traditionally associated with column-writing, constructs an ethos that is both trustworthy and fallible; indeed, it is trustworthy in part because it openly concedes the author’s fallibility. The other function, traditionally associated with straightforward, fact-based news reports, gains credibility from these ethotic appeals, but also makes complementary appeals using tropes and patterns of binary opposition. In general, we believe, the two functions cooperate to elicit reasonable assent; however, the rhetorical complications entailed in reporting on some topics resist the hybrid genre as Blatchford practices it. As we argue in the third part, which turns to Blatchford’s extensive writing on Canadian involvement in the war in Afghanistan, embeddedness proves to be one such problem. Finally, in our concluding section, we briefly address some of the larger questions posed by Blatchford’s practices.

**An outline of pragmatic objectivity**

At the heart of traditional notions of objectivity in journalism “lies the idea that reporters should provide straight, unbiased information” (Ward, 2004, p. 19). Weak as it may seem, given the nature of human perception and language, this fundamental assumption has nonetheless led to some sound journalistic practices, as Ward (2004) acknowledges. Among these are the use of sources considered to be authoritative and reliable; the use of quotation, attribution, and verification when citing these sources; the balancing of a story by providing different points of view; and the avoidance of loaded or emotional language. There is no question that such practices have made reporting more accurate and trustworthy, insofar as they involve checks and restraints that greatly reduce the likelihood of too much bias, inadvertent or otherwise. But they can also become a means of avoiding difficult judgments (Ward, 2004). Sometimes, neutral language is inappropriate, insofar as it understates the unfairness or the gravity of a situation. Sometimes, the ostensible balancing of a report is misleading, insofar as it creates the impression that the opposing sides of an issue are equally valid or equally supported by communities of experts when in reality they are far from equal (Ward, 2004). This is what characterized reporting on climate change for far too long (Dumanoski, Farland, & Krimsky, 1999; Rogers, 1999).

Such problems must be seen within the framework of powerful norms that have evolved over decades and continue to exert influence on the profession (Ward, 2004). To extend the preceding example: even when an experienced journalist decides, after carefully reviewing the evidence, not to include the opinions of skeptics in a piece on climate change, she may find that her article ultimately gets printed next to one legitimizing such opinions at the insistence of an editor who wants both sides of the story. Old-school editors are not the only source of objectivist constraint on journalists. Over time, for example, the desire to be and to appear to be objective has become ingrained
in the very structure of newspapers, which foregrounds non-interpretive, “hard” news, setting it apart from everything else (Ward, 2004). As newspapers evolved, it was apparently not enough to reduce communicative bias. Bias had to be excommunicated, placed outside the boundaries of straight news, corralled into sections of the paper reserved for argument, commentary, and entertainment, and thereby implicitly designated “the business of editorialists and columnists, not of reporters” (p. 19).

All of this is, of course, a familiar academic refrain: traditional journalistic objectivity is a flawed notion, and even the best of its methods are, as Ward puts it, “fallible.” According to Ward (2004), most journalists and newsrooms also recognize its failings; traditional objectivity is an ideal that “fewer and fewer” embrace “in practice” (p. 4). But what do they embrace instead? What should they? In Ward’s view, journalists still need a “clear, vigorous norm.” At the moment, they rely on “a non-systematic hodgepodge of common sense, skepticism, and informal rules that newsrooms follow with varying consistency” (p. 293).

Fundamental to Ward’s (2004) definition of a new norm is the assumption that objects, methods, and purposes of inquiry vary: “Truth and its methods are plural” (p. 268). One of the problems with journalism rooted in traditional notions of objectivity is that it is based on faulty assumptions about the kinds of truth that journalism is intended and equipped to pursue. As a result, such journalism has come to rely on methods that are not so much wrong as too limited. Journalism can never have the rigour of science, because it faces tasks very different from those faced in the sciences. It is inherently a “value-laden craft” (p. 302). To base practices on the assumption that reporting can be free of bias, that the reporter can be a “perfect recording instrument” (p. 262) for conveying the Truth, is to deny both the humanity of the journalist and the complexity of her task. It can easily result in the sacrifice of breadth, flexibility, and significance for the sake of a narrow correctness. Working under severe time constraints and dealing, often, with issues that involve conflicting values or competing interests, the journalist must assess situations that change and data that are invariably incomplete. The goal in this “precarious epistemological situation” (p. 264) ought not to be perfection or the Truth, but the best one can do in the circumstances, the truth as one sees it. For this, the use of facts and expert opinion is necessary, but it is rarely sufficient. What is also needed is interpretation of fact and opinion—in short, “reasonable judgment in a context” (p. 263). Traditional objectivity subverts such judgment.

Encouraging interpretation will raise some concerns about opening the door to unrestrained subjectivity, as Ward appreciates. Any shift from the objective norms of traditional journalism is likely to evoke anxiety within the profession and among the public.2 And it is not just the hardcore traditionalist or the skeptical reader who finds the shift unsettling. Even the most responsible journalists may rightly ask themselves, how can I be sure that my reading of events is not skewed? Not surprisingly, Ward’s answer to questions of this sort is that there can be no guarantees. But the likelihood of getting things right—of getting close to reading events fairly and accurately—can be increased by prolonged diligence.

Precisely how this might be done is, to some extent, a question that must be answered by each journalist in the course of his or her own practice (or uncovered by
the rhetorical critic, as we seek to do in this article). The methods journalists can employ in their “truth-seeking” and the means by which they can apply these methods over time are innumerable. But Ward does offer some helpful suggestions. For one thing, the perfectionist attitude inculcated by traditional objectivity must be replaced by an attitude of “imperfectionism,” which respects the value and social responsibilities of journalism but remains realistic:

Imperfectionism reduces expectations but does not settle for the status quo. It recognizes that institutions, imperfect forms of reasoning, and imperfect spheres of human activity may still contribute something useful to society. It refuses to run away from life to a perfect, transcendent reality. It sees value in seeking the most reasonable beliefs and the best, but imperfect, practices in many areas of life; it values practical reasoning and non-absolute forms of inquiry, even if the conclusions are fallible (p. 34).

Journalists must be pragmatic. They can and should employ the methods of traditional objectivity described above, but they must do so with a more judicious sense of what such methods can and cannot achieve, and of when and why they are insufficient. As Ward (2004) puts it, “[A]ll forms of journalism, from straight reporting to editorials, [involve] interpretation” (p. 22). The art lies not in avoiding interpretation, but in knowing when, how much, and what kinds of interpretation are needed. What suffices for a cat-stuck-up-the-tree story will not work for complex topics such as “civil wars and foreign lands” (p. 310). In such cases, what is required is not just facts but a combination of “valuing, observation, interpreting, and theorizing” (p. 303). Practices once avoided by journalists (e.g., personal references and emotional language) may, on occasion, be legitimate and effective means of approximating the truth or, as we will see in the case of Blatchford, of giving readers a better sense of the journalist herself, and thus an additional means of assessing her perspective.

The ability to judge what works is developed through doing, that is, through the active use of interpretive judgment, motivated by passionate commitment to truth. Though necessarily imperfect, interpretation compels the journalist to articulate truth as best she can, providing her with an opportunity through that articulation to see where she is wrong and move closer to getting things right the next time (Ward, 2004). The improvement of judgment over time also involves turning one’s attention outward. It is enlarged by assessing new information, observing the practices of other journalists, and attending to changing public opinion (including, when it is available, public feedback) (Ward, 2004). By such means does diligence over time, involving reflection and passion in the pursuit of the truth, partially compensate for a journalist’s bias and for the epistemic fallibility of her methods. It helps her achieve “partial transcendence” (p. 298).

Finally, the checks and balances on one’s judgment over time ought to include something like the to-and-fro process of adjustment that John Rawls has called “reflective equilibrium” (Ward, 2004, p. 279). Contrary to the ideals of traditional objectivity, we know that interpretation is ubiquitous, and that it occurs largely through conceptual schemata (Ward). We do not experience unmediated data, to which we then apply constructs; rather, we experience data through schematic constructs (concepts, princi-
This tendency poses ethical and epistemological dangers because our schemata, being human, are always partial. As Kenneth Burke (1954) famously said, “a way of seeing is a way of not seeing” (p. 49). Cognitive habit, loyalty, or laziness may keep us clinging to theories or ethical principles that do not adequately explain new data. It is important, therefore, that we monitor both our schemata and phenomena, checking one against the other in order to assess not only the status of new facts and ideas but also the continuing accuracy and usefulness of our holistic schemes. By this “constant activity of mutual adjustment of principles, rules, facts, and judgments” (Ward, 2004, p. 279), we keep in touch with the world and reduce the chances that our holistic judgment will lead us astray. For the contemporary journalist, and indeed for contemporary journalism, this process of adjustment may involve some redefinition of responsibilities. The shrinking of distances and dissolution of boundaries made possible by new media technology have given greater urgency to the need for world citizenry. A new ethical paradigm, what Ward calls the “new social contract,” calls for “an international impartiality that leaves behind the last vestiges of parochialism” (p. 327). Journalists must avoid “bias towards one’s country or culture as a whole … especially when dealing with international issues and events” (p. 329). As will become evident, these are particularly important considerations in our assessment of Blatchford.

Towards the end of The Invention of Journalism Ethics, Ward (2004) borrows a striking simile from the Austrian political economist Otto Neurath to encapsulate the process of modern inquiry. An inquirer, suggests Neurath, is like “a sailor who repairs his boat as he sails along” (p. 80). This is certainly a more captivating definition than the “diligent application of fallible methods over time,” but it makes essentially the same point: even with good tools at hand, sometimes the best one can do in changing, unpredictable circumstances is pay attention, work hard, make considered judgments, and adjust to the weather. What the journalist requires is phronesis, or practical wisdom. This idea will leave some observers anxious, perhaps with good reason. But Ward would remind us that in journalism, the sailor has shipmates. She may write alone, but her invention is inescapably social—grounded in socially constructed schemata; dependant on observing disciplinary practice; attendant to public debate and feedback; influenced by the judgment of colleagues. The journalist’s way of seeing is to this extent the result not of subjectivity but of inter-subjective agreement, surely a kind of objectivity. She has a far better chance than the lone sailor of keeping afloat.

On the other hand, the journalist also has an audience. Indeed, as Ward knows, audience largely determines whether and to what degree she succeeds. From our viewpoint as rhetorical critics, this is crucial. Having good judgment is not enough; one must show good judgment. Phronesis must be rhetorically constructed for readers, who are less likely than journalists to have rejected traditional objectivity. How this task is managed by one journalist will be our focus in the remainder of this article.

“Reporter with a column”: Blatchford and the hybrid genre
As a means of exploring how pragmatic objectivity might be played out in practice, Christie Blatchford’s columns have much to recommend them. One reason is the respect of her peers. She won a 1999 National Newspaper Award for column writing,
the 2006 Ross Munro Media Award for her “significant and extraordinary contribution to increasing public understanding of Canadian defence and security issues” (Canadian Defense and Foreign Affairs Institute), and the 2008 Governor General’s Award for Nonfiction for her book *Fifteen Days: Stories of Bravery, Friendship, Life and Death from Inside the New Canadian Army*. Robert Fulford has called her “an artist among journalists” (Fulford, 2004), and G. Stuart Adam has placed her investigative reporting for the *National Post* alongside the work of Joan Didion, Lewis Lapham, and George Will as rewarding study for aspiring journalists. In short, Blatchford's work is seen by her peers as exemplary—an important consideration for the present paper, since one of our goals is to start a conversation about the shape of pragmatic objectivity in best practice.

Blatchford also has popular appeal. Indeed, the *Ryerson Review of Journalism* (Drach, 2002) observed that when she joined the *National Post* in 1998 Blatchford became “arguably the country’s most popular journalist.” This popularity has likely grown since she returned to *The Globe and Mail*, given that paper’s greater circulation. From the perspective of rhetorical criticism, public appeal is as important as respect among peers. Whether or not academics and colleagues commend a journalist’s work, a wide readership indicates at the very least the possibility of having significant impact on public opinion. This is particularly true in this country, where newspapers are “the principal medium for Canadians to address other Canadians” (Aldridge, 2001, p. 611).

Blatchford’s explicitly stated position on objectivity also makes her an apt subject for our analysis. Speaking to an audience at the University of Western Ontario in November 2007, she declared:

> I never bought into the objectivity thing, even as a young reporter. I believe in accuracy and fairness instead. Those are more important and always have been. Objectivity is journalism’s false god.4

This unequivocal rejection is not surprising, for as Ward argues, few contemporary journalists buy into the notion of traditional objectivity. Nonetheless, it says something fundamental about Blatchford’s perspective, as does the fact that this statement comes not from a young reporter but from a practicing, experienced columnist. The implication is that accuracy and fairness are essential qualities of reporting and column writing alike, that the columnist who has rejected traditional objectivity is no more entitled than the reporter to say whatever she likes. As Blatchford argues elsewhere, even the columnist should operate on the assumption that opinions “are always secondary to the facts.” In this respect she resembles Ward, who eschews any firm distinction between interpretive journalism and non-interpretive, “hard” news. Indeed, Blatchford has described herself as “a reporter with a column,” whose greatest strength is “keen observation” (Ryerson Alumni Profiles, 1997). Her *Globe and Mail* editor, who “hired Blatchford for her reporting ability,” would appear to agree (Wingrove, 2005).

It is this yoking of the traditional functions of reporter and columnist that makes Blatchford’s journalism particularly interesting as an example of pragmatic objectivity at work. It demonstrates that Blatchford’s rejection of traditional objectivity is neither fashionable attitude nor mere lip service; the very form in which she has chosen to
perform constitutes an active seeking for alternatives. This hybrid form has two sides: a reportorial side, which is for the most part impersonal, informative, and dependent on traditional methods of reportage; and a more complex ethotic side, which over time constructs the reader’s sense of the columnist’s character and values through a range of “voiced” appeals (expressive, suasive, confessional, etc.). Each side influences our reading of the other.

At first glance, some ethotic dimensions of Blatchford’s writing seem conventional, the sort of thing one expects from genres intended to entertain rather than inform. From references to her personal life, for instance, readers learn about Blatchford’s exercise regime, travel, and favourite pastimes; share in reminiscences of her student days; come to know her marital status, her extended family, her fondness for pets, and her love of hockey. On occasion, she goes much further, freely offering up details that breach conventional lines between the personal and the private. She refers to herself as consumed by the “calling” of journalism, as a workaholic who is single, childless, and “who am I kidding, for God’s sakes, mostly dateless” (May 31, 2008). Sexual references are frequent. She will turn discussion of hockey into commentary on the sexual appeal of hockey players, and interrupt discussion of crime by bemoaning the fact that a convicted murderer “has in the ordinary course more sex than I do” (July 2, 2005). She ponders the pleasures of having “a naked man in my kitchen” (October 6, 2007). She supports a claim about the longevity of the Rolling Stones by describing the lead singer’s physical attributes: “Jagger’s pants remain to my practised eye as well-stuffed as ever they were” (October 1, 2005). As Fulford asks, rhetorically, “Has any journalist before her written so blatantly about sex?” (Fulford, 2004).

Entertaining as it can be, this highly personal discourse bears little resemblance to the self-indulgent chatter typical of “lifestyle” columnists. Blatchford is, clearly, a serious writer, whose main objective is not to amuse or provoke but to present reliable, firsthand accounts of significant civic events and issues. We know this in part because of Blatchford’s main topics—crime, politics, and war—and in part because detailed, fact-based reporting, some of it from dangerous war zones, has such presence in her work. But her ethos also gains gravitas through frequent recollections, reflections, and asides that construct her (despite the sexual references) as someone committed to “old-fashioned values.” She demonstrates, for example, a strong work ethic, a felt need to take action against injustice, a love of country and its soldiers, firm convictions about honour and honesty. (That these attitudes have, by her admission, come from her father only increases our sense of them as old-fashioned, a matter to which we will return in our analysis of her Afghanistan columns).

This unusual blend of civic purpose and private reference underpins our reception of Blatchford’s writing. Her columns close the gaps that characterize much journalism: between the personal and the professional, the private and the personal, the writer and the reader. That this proximity evokes some negative reactions is to be expected, especially when it occurs in journalistic arenas such as crime reporting, where traditions of detachment and objectivity are especially strong. Our own response as readers is mixed. Occasionally, we find that the author’s personal proximity evokes something akin to dissent. More often, though, our dominant response
is assent. By “assent,” we hasten to add, we do not mean to suggest that we “identify with,” “like,” or even consistently agree with Blatchford; rather, we mean that we trust her. Over time and through a wealth of personal information, her columns construct her as someone who is both forthcoming and limited. We know that she is not objective in the traditional sense, yet we also know “where she is coming from.” She is limited in ways we can understand. So we have confidence that she will tell a story as accurately as she can and that we can gauge her bias if and when inevitable blind spots or personal convictions threaten her reliability.

The trust evoked by the ethotic side of this hybrid genre extends to its reportorial side. Put simply, Blatchford's open-handedness with personal facts alters our reception of the public facts in her columns, softening our customary skepticism and transforming fact-based reportage into something less like rhetorical selection and more like “truth” observed, recorded, and delivered. This impression of rhetorical transparency is further reinforced by the reportage itself, more specifically, by its stylistic features.

The interaction of ethos and reportage we seek to describe here is highly complex. It is a phenomenon that must be experienced through the act of regular reading, as rhetorical specifics are encountered against a backdrop of the columnist's ethos, which is established over time. Nevertheless, something of its operations can be appreciated by considering Blatchford's frequent use of two interconnected devices of style: binary oppositions of proximity and distance, and what we will call tropes of ocularity. Before we close this section with a final argument for reading Blatchford as a practitioner of pragmatic objectivity, it may prove helpful to explain these devices in some detail.

Ocular tropes in Blatchford's hybrid columns reinforce the impression of transparent reporting, suggesting that the writer sees things as they are. About a trial of suspected terrorists, Blatchford writes, “Even before I knew for sure that they're [sic] all Muslims, I suspected as much from what I saw on the tube, perhaps because I am a trained observer, or, you know, because I have eyes” (June 5, 2006). “The information was hiding in plain sight” (April 27, 2007), she states on one occasion; on another, “Some things are plain on their face” (Blatchford on Canada's Mission, July 11, 2006). The last two examples, it is worth noting, come from columns that stress the confusion of their respective scenes. Of the Conrad Black trial, she writes, “In all this murkiness it's hard to tell who the good guys are” (March 23, 2007); of the terrorist attacks in London, “there is no telling friend from foe in the new war” (July 11, 2005). The lack of agency in these sentences indicates ocular limits that are a result of the situation rather than a symptom of the reporter's incapacity. Nevertheless, that such limits are admitted at all suggests reportorial honesty—even the trained reporter cannot see everything. Moreover, the admission has the additional advantage of suggesting the reportorial acuity of this reporter, since she is able to see “some things” clearly amid such confusing scenes. These tropes of ocularity, in other words, allow Blatchford to enjoy the benefits of association with traditional objectivity even as she concedes her subjective position. As she puts it elsewhere, placing emphasis on the pronouns, “All I can say with any authority is what I see.” She closes that same column with a reminder that this “is just how all this appears to me” (July 20, 2005). The “I” and
“me” in such instances, it is worth reiterating, represent an ethos that has been constructed over time not only as forthcoming (she “really” is telling us what she sees), but as diligent about her reportorial responsibilities (we can be assured that she has looked long and hard).

Intertwined with these ocular tropes are binary oppositions of proximity and distance. The connection is hardly surprising for a writer who does not, and believes one cannot, take the “person” out of the reporter; it is the human eye that Blatchford values, not the eye of the camera, which, despite its ostensible impartiality and technological wherewithal to shrink great distances, cannot “make sense” of what it sees. Her presence at the scene, her opportunity to write about what she sees, often grounds her columns. For instance, she writes, “I live across from the University of Toronto’s main campus downtown, and for as long as I’ve been there, I watched the same scene unfold every fall” (September 14, 2006); “I was in the courtroom four years ago when … (September 24, 2008); “I spent the day mit Mitt Romney” (January 8, 2008); “I’ve watched the startling events in Ottawa unfold” (December 8, 2008). For the most part, this connection between proximity and accurate vision is unproblematic. It simply reinforces our sense of Blatchford as a reporter whose diligence makes her reliable. However, as we shall argue in our analysis of her Afghanistan columns, the connection between vision and proximity at times suggests that only those near events can know the truth about them, for only they can see things firsthand. Much as it may strengthen the reader’s sense that her on-site reporting is reliable, this implicit equation of “truth-telling” with visual proximity also raises questions about Blatchford’s impartiality when she is embedded with Canadian troops. In our opinion, she underestimates the dangers of visual proximity and potential advantages of seeing from a distance.

It must be said at this stage, however, that Blatchford cannot be accused of journalistic naïveté; she is aware of the criticisms of reporters embedded with the military and offers a vigorous defence. This brings us to a final kinship between her practice and Ward’s theory: an intuitive sense of the need for “reflective equilibrium.” The term designates a process far more deliberate and systematic than Blatchford’s is likely to be, but that is to be expected. As Ward observes, journalists may not “completely articulate” their ethical principles in the ways that philosophers do, but “we can see [such principles] operating in their decisions and practices” (2004, p. 23). In Blatchford’s case, one such principle might be articulated as “be vigilant about bias.” There are, she knows, risks inherent in “the writer’s struggle”: “adjectives sometimes get the best of you” (January 14, 2006). There is also the danger of cultural chauvinism, and of reactions that are “manifestation[s] of my Western arrogance” (an awareness of which can lead to “Western guilt”) (July 22, 2005). And there is the ever-present, overarching possibility of simply assuming that one sees things “as they are.” Reflecting on a Hollinger CEO who claims, “I never had any concerns about my objectivity,” Blatchford comments, “Well, one never does about one’s own objectivity, does one? That’s the thing about standing in judgment of oneself: one is blinded by the sheer knowledge of one’s own virtue” (March 23, 2007). Of course, Blatchford does not think she is objective; she tells us as much through her references to Western
arrogance, the writer’s struggle, and so on. But her remark is especially illuminating, insofar as it reminds us that the illusion of objectivity is always present.

We have, then, a number of reasons for reading Blatchford’s journalism as an example of pragmatic objectivity in practice. Her hybrid columns constitute an attempt to discover a new, more balanced alternative to traditional objectivity, one that avoids the fact/value dichotomy by blending the strengths of two distinctly different genres. We should not be surprised, however, that this new approach also entails problems, given the epistemological and rhetorical context in which Blatchford operates. We are all, readers and journalists alike, in a state of transition, skeptical about traditional objectivity but uncertain about the alternatives. Even if we understand on some level that interpretation cannot be avoided, this understanding can easily be overruled by habit; our reading practices are formed, among other things, by the longstanding schism between straight news and everything else in newspapers, a schism that has been widened by the proliferation of extreme voices on radio and the Internet. To make the point more simply: most of us still tend to read news reports “straight” and to see columnists as “a good deal like preachers” (Scott & Klumpp, p. 145). A columnist whose primary goal is, as Ward would have it, “truth-telling” rather than entertainment or conversion must deal with these audience expectations. However many facts she uses, however accurate these facts, the journalist who chooses the column as her venue must still do considerable rhetorical work to persuade her readers of her reliability, her insight, and, paradoxical though it may seem, her limitations (i.e., not that she is “telling the truth” but that she is telling one plausible truth, worth hearing). For Blatchford, the key may lie in balancing the two parts of a hybrid genre. Her columns on Afghanistan indicate the immense difficulty of this task.

**Blatchford in/on Afghanistan: The problems of embedded journalism**

In this section, we concentrate on Blatchford’s writing about the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan, a topic that has been the focus of more than one hundred columns since March 2006 as well as her 2008 book *Fifteen Days: Stories of Bravery, Friendship, Life and Death from Inside the New Canadian Army*. The columns draw on the author’s four stays in Afghanistan, where she was embedded with Canadian troops. Some are virtually dispatches from the field; others, written after Blatchford’s return to Canada, offer reflections on her experiences, further accounts of soldiers and their families, and commentary about the debate over Canadian involvement.7

In many respects these columns resemble her others. Yet Afghanistan also presents a special case, not so much because of its international scope—Blatchford has dealt with matters involving other cultures and ideologies elsewhere, for example, in her columns on the London terrorist bombings—but because of the limits imposed by embedding. Embeddedness has consequences for both sides of the rhetorical transaction: for the reader, who may be reasonably concerned that embedding threatens the reporter’s independence; and for the writer, who must try to maintain and give the appearance of maintaining that independence despite reliance on military handlers. Knowing that she is embedded, readers may ask themselves whether Blatchford’s reports are reliable, and if so, to what extent. In other columns, we have argued, the hybrid genre enabled Blatchford to go beyond conventions of traditional reporting with
various ethotic appeals, and in so doing define herself as an eyewitness who is simultaneously limited and reliable. We trusted her. In Afghanistan, however, the balance between columnist and reporter becomes more elusive. In the complicated trade-off between independence and access in a theatre of war, the quintessential problem is not just to maintain what Ward calls “partial transcendence” but to convince readers that she has done so.

Blatchford has remarked on more than one occasion that her primary motive as a journalist is to inform her readers. This motive has particular urgency in Afghanistan. Given public perceptions—for example, that Canada should be a “peacekeeping nation,” and that the U.S. “war on terrorism” is misguided—the presence of our military in Afghanistan has provoked considerable debate. In Blatchford’s view, this debate has been ill informed. Communicating the goals of the Canadian mission is, she realizes, not a simple task. She acknowledges the complexities of modern warfare, especially “[f]ighting a counter-insurgency” (March 25, 2006) in “the trickster Afghanistan” (July 10, 2006), where “unconfirmed reports” (December 19, 2006) are commonplace, where men on bicycles or donkeys can be lethal carriers of IEDs (September 19, 2006), and where the “wary” inhabitants have learned, understandably, “to err on the side of protective dissembling” (September 8, 2007). “[T]his is not war,” she says, “nor peace-making, certainly not peacekeeping, but rather some ill-defined and uneasy mélange of elements from all three” (March 25, 2006). Even in the face of these complications, however, those responsible for informing Canadians about events could have done much better. The Harper government has generally done a “dreadful job” of explaining the mission (September 16, 2006), and the NDP has been “dishonest” (September 4, 2006). Though the media have performed better, ultimately they too have failed to get the message across, being all too willing to accept the government’s “duplicitous double-speak” and spin it out “virtually unaltered for hours at a stretch” (January 26, 2008). Blatchford is particularly dismissive of those who pronounce at a distance, “from the comfort of their armchairs” (July 10, 2006), from “the real Canadian world, where people pontificate from comfortable places, spout big thoughts from small knowledge bases” (April 8, 2006). As we have explained, it is her belief that one can report reliably only if one is close to the action and sees things firsthand.

In this context, it is not surprising that the columns written in Afghanistan rely strongly on reportage. Reporting is what she has often said she does best, and in this case, she believes, it is what Canadians most need. Her Afghanistan columns, filed mostly from Kandahar, often use strategies that emphasize the advantages of being positioned right at the scene of the action, with ready access to those involved (Anderson, 1987). Blatchford quotes directly and liberally from such sources as Canadian soldiers, the Indian Ambassador, a woman finishing six months of work at the Kandahar Tim Hortons, and letters that soldiers have received from Canadian schoolchildren. As she travels with the troops, her narratives strive to convey “the clashing noises that make up the soundtrack of modern Afghanistan” (December 19, 2006) as well as the striking sights she observes. Blatchford precisely documents such details as distances travelled; the speed of a convoy and the nationalities of its participants; the average salary of interpreters employed by Canadian or American forces;
and the exact contents of aid packages given to Afghan villagers. Accounting such as this reminds the reader both that Blatchford has gained a privileged perspective on unfolding events and that she is a keen observer of relevant detail.

As in other columns, the impact of such reportage is enhanced by the author's characteristic tropes and emphasis on proximity. Blatchford asserts that she writes about “what I see or hear with my own ears and eyes” (February 25, 2008), what “I have seen ... first-hand” (April 24, 2007), and what “the intimate glimpse of the men... [on her first tour] ... afforded” (March 25, 2006). One column instructs the reader to “Hold that image. ... Now picture the man on the bicycle, moving toward them” (September 19, 2006). These reportorial devices are occasionally supplemented by implicit appeals from the ethosic side of her hybrid column. Sometimes these appeals suggest only the difference between being close to and far from the action: the world back home seems “far away now out here in the middle of nowhere where life is reduced to basics: grub, a change of underwear once a week, sleep and survival” (December 23, 2006). Other times, they suggest perspectival advantage: “Anyone who has been to Afghanistan and spent any significant time with Canadian soldiers,” she claims, “learns a couple of things pretty quickly” (April 24, 2007). The overall effect is to remind us that Blatchford is “someone who has actually spoken to some of our serving men and women” (September 19, 2006).

In other contexts, in reports on crime or national politics, for example, techniques of this sort have struck us as persuasive, in part because they are read against the backdrop of an ethos constructed, over time, as open-handed, sturdily independent, and reliable. But a key rhetorical variable has changed in the Afghanistan columns, and with it the expectations of readers: Blatchford the reporter is embedded with Canadian military forces. Readers believe, and Blatchford knows that they believe, that this entails risks to reportorial impartiality. There are ramifications for both sides of the hybrid column.

That Blatchford recognizes readers’ concerns is made clear by her sometimes lengthy comments on embedding. One of her most sustained defences of the practice appears in a column of May 31, 2008:

The program is of huge concern in journalism schools and to big thinkers, who argue that the practice doesn't lend itself to traditional objective reporting and engenders too much familiarity.

As someone who has been embedded four times, I don’t agree .... Setting aside her apparent acceptance of objectivity as a norm (which, as we noted earlier, she has rejected on other occasions), her defence here is based on two major claims. The first is that the dangers of embedding can be avoided, or at least mitigated, by acknowledgement. In her view, embedding is more commonplace than is generally supposed and a frequent occurrence in political reporting, where reporters can spend “years and sometimes whole careers” in “close quarters with their subjects” (May 31, 2008). Indeed, she argues that “Ottawa-centric reporting ... is a more insidious form of embedding than what my colleagues and I were doing in Afghanistan” (April 8, 2006) because the former is unacknowledged. Her second claim is that she and her colleagues in Afghanistan make such an acknowledgement by “sign[ing] off on the
deal.” “We know what we are for the duration of our stint,” she writes, “It’s a straight-up arrangement” (April 8, 2006).9

Acknowledgement, then, is crucial in Blatchford’s view. On one level, she appears to meet this standard by telling us repeatedly that she is embedded. This acknowledgement of perspectival status “keeps her honest,” both in the sense that it reminds the author of her limits and in the sense that it extends our trust; were her columns silent on this score, she might imply an independence that the embedded reporter does not possess. On another level, however, this same acknowledgment becomes problematic. In other Blatchford columns, admission of reportorial limits goes hand-in-hand with a personal confidence, a refusal to defer to other perspectives, including those of experts. In the Afghanistan columns, by contrast, we note a startling frequency of self-deprecating concessions about her lack of expertise: she refers to “conveniently forgetting the breadth of my own wide-ranging incompetence,” (September 1, 2007) and to “my inexpert monitoring of the radio” (July 10, 2006); she “pretend[s] no expertise in politics, diplomacy, soldiering or Afghanistan” (January 19, 2008). Indeed, so pervasive are her doubts about her knowledge that, in an online forum, she follows up the acknowledgment that she’s “no expert in policy stuff” with a telling aside: “(Or anything else. I notice I keep repeating this phrase)” (Christie Blatchford on Canada’s mission, July 11, 2006).

It needs to be emphasized just how far this acknowledgment of “wide-ranging incompetence” and lack of expertise in “anything” extends: time and again, she makes concessions even about her own craft, treating the words of the military, including the families of soldiers and those who write about soldiering, as more reliable than her own. Citing a colleague’s description of him as “ferociously articulate,” she writes to one reserve infantryman for permission to use his comments verbatim because “I wasn’t satisfied with the job I’d done first time around. I thought he’d done a better job, in fact, than I had … [and] … I often feel clumsy compared with many of the soldiers I meet” (July 15, 2006). Months later, her readiness to accede to the words of soldiers encompasses her fellow journalists, as she contrasts “all the words and miles of tape the former … [reporters] … have produced” to “all the intelligent comments … [soldiers] … have made from the lowliest private all the way up through the ranks to colonels” (September 16, 2006).

Seen in this context, Blatchford’s use of sources, both primary and secondary, also begins to look quite different. Indeed, they strike us as reportorial counterparts to the ethotic deference to the military we have just described. Many columns rely heavily on the reported speech of soldiers and their families (a tendency which becomes even more striking in Fifteen Days). Moreover, her sources—works like On Combat or a study by retired U.S. Army General Barry McCaffrey—are almost invariably sympathetic to the military. Admittedly, she shows occasional signs of reflexivity about this tendency. Leaving Afghanistan, for instance, she notes that “reporters often grow attached to their stories,” and she alerts the reader to the possibility that she overstates her sadness because she has “acquired by osmosis from our soldiers there” a sense of responsibility to the country (July 29, 2006). But this ostensible sign of perspectival awareness can be read in two ways, with an emphasis on the attachment and osmo-
sis, or on the detachment that the naming of these implies. It is partly because such instances are rare, and use of military voices so common, that we as readers attend to the former rather than the latter.

What emerges in Blatchford’s columns on Afghanistan, then, is an ethos different from the one constructed elsewhere. It frequently concedes inexpertise, it defers to others (not just on military matters but even on matters of communication), and it offers few indications of reflective equilibrium. All of this happens, moreover, against a backdrop of more reportage and fewer personal details about herself. The result, in our view, is that the sturdy, independent ethos that once enhanced reportorial reliability no longer seems quite so sturdy or independent.

We are emphatically not suggesting that the Afghanistan columns construct a character wholly different from the one constructed elsewhere. Indeed, since the ethotic side of the hybrid column is a combination of long-term and short-term construction, many dimensions of character that have emerged over time continue to influence our reading of the author. What we are suggesting is a re-alignment: as a result of the deference and reduced reflexivity shown on one topic over the short-term, something of an ethotic vacuum is created, and it is a vacuum that readers may fill with recollections of the long-term ethos. Among the recollections that rush into the vacuum, not surprisingly, are those that have obvious relevance to the topic of Afghanistan, specifically, that mélange of “old fashioned” values to which we referred earlier: patriotism, a fierce work ethic, and the importance of taking action against injustice. These values are also explicitly invoked in the Afghanistan columns. But the difference between their explicit and recollected presence here, and their presence elsewhere, is considerable. Here, such values beg questions at the very heart of the matter at hand: whose justice? which patriotism? what kind of action? yet the author’s deference to the military and lack of reflective equilibrium construct her as someone who simply ignores or fails to appreciate the existence of such questions. Even one of her great strengths elsewhere, her construction, over time, of an open-handed ethos, seems only to exacerbate problems in the Afghanistan columns; presumably, she is not concealing doubts about the Canadian mission, so she must not have any. So, too, does her fondness for her father, a former lieutenant in the Canadian Air Force from whom Blatchford has sometimes said she “inherited” such “old-fashioned” values. If this seems, in other columns, an endearing dimension of a complex ethos (and one that, we would add, confounds gender stereotypes), in the Afghanistan columns it tends instead to echo her own metaphors about “attachment” and “osmosis,” suggesting that her position on soldiers and their mission is shaped as much by sentiment as by critical reasoning.

All of this redounds on Blatchford’s reportage. When one side of the hybrid column suggests insufficient awareness of perspectival limits, how should we read the other side? Ironically, the very emphasis on proximal vision that strengthens our sense of reportorial reliability elsewhere risks undermining it in the Afghanistan columns, insofar as it suggests that Blatchford’s perspective suffers from being too close to the soldiers and the action. The “armchair critics” may not see events firsthand, but they do appear to be asking the sorts of fundamental questions that Blatchford does not.
Concluding remarks

The British philosopher and social critic Bertrand Russell wasn’t talking about journalism when he said, “Mathematics may be defined as the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, nor whether what we are saying is true,” but he surely could have been.

Christie Blatchford, The Globe and Mail, December 2, 2005

If it exaggerates Blatchford’s view of her profession, the above comparison does so only slightly. The regular reader of her columns will notice that they often disparage journalists, including herself. No sensible person would, however, take such criticism to mean that Blatchford sees journalists as incompetent or their effort as a waste of time. She is clearly passionate about her work, in ways that seem rooted in strong convictions about its larger value. The effect of her criticism, rather, is to remind us (and perhaps herself) that she and her colleagues are merely human and that whatever they say or write must be interpreted accordingly. Journalism is not, in the traditional sense, objective.

This awareness that journalism is always imperfect—that traditional journalistic objectivity is impossible—is just one of several resemblances between Christie Blatchford and Stephen Ward. Both the practitioner and the theorist also understand that imperfection is no excuse for irresponsible subjectivity. Whether perfect truth is ungraspable, untellable, or simply non-existent, journalists should nonetheless be driven by the “truth-telling principle.” It might be said, paradoxically, that they must balance the pursuit of perfection with an awareness that it cannot be attained. Ward tells us that this is best accomplished by the “diligent application of fallible methods over time.” Blatchford’s hybrid columns show us what some of these methods might look like in practice. Using the column’s ethotic side to reveal details about her life and attitudes, she constructs herself as both open-handed and idiosyncratic, with important consequences for our sense of her truth-telling. Patterns of language in the column’s reportorial side also play a crucial role in this process. Her ocular tropes and binary oppositions between proximity and distance often reassure us of her reportorial accuracy even as they remind us that she can only report on what she sees. In other words, they remind us of her perspectival limits.

In our view, Blatchford’s handling of this genre is more problematic in her columns on Afghanistan, where her status as an embedded reporter constitutes a crucial new rhetorical variable. If she is to persuade readers that her version of events is reliable—that despite the imperfect tools of human perception and language, it approaches what Carl Bernstein calls “the best obtainable version of the truth” (quoted in Ward, 2004, p. 292)—Blatchford must counter the widespread assumption that embedding undermines reportorial independence. “Facts” alone will not be enough to accomplish this goal, since facts can be found anywhere. What is also needed is evidence of judgment about facts, indications that the reporter is aware of how embedding has limited the facts observed, that she has considered what those limits might mean, and that she is willing to take into account the perspectives of oth-
ers who have not been so limited. There is insufficient evidence of such judgements in the Afghanistan columns.

This is not to suggest that the hybrid column is an inadequate vehicle for the practice of pragmatic objectivity in journalism, or that Blatchford fails over the long term to take advantage of the opportunities it affords. If the columns on Afghanistan are particularly problematic, this may in part be due to difficulties inherent in her subject matter. Embedding is a special case, certainly, but in general, as Ward (2004) emphasizes, “the fog of war severely hampers journalists’ search for truth” (p. 293). Moreover, we see no reason why the author’s writing on Afghanistan published to this point should be taken to constitute her final position on the subject or to fix her rhetorical ethos. One of the advantages of the hybrid genre, as Blatchford herself demonstrates, is its flexibility. It is, like more traditional methods of journalism, fallible, but it also allows for more corrective adjustment over time. In Blatchford’s case, such adjustment might take the form of a gradual renewal of ethos. For example, she might demonstrate that she has distanced herself from some attachments by giving opposing views of the war a fair hearing and acknowledging that critics have good reason to be wary of embedding.

Our aim has been not to test pragmatic objectivity, but to explore how it might be played out in the practice of a single journalist. Nonetheless, our analysis raises questions about the place of at least one of its components: reflective equilibrium. Though it has the potential to serve as a valuable, albeit imperfect corrective to human fallibility, we question its efficacy in journalism, especially in times such as ours. The monitoring and adjusting of one’s assumptions would seem to require an extraordinary degree of introspection and analytical insight, not to mention time and patience, especially when cherished values are at issue. Given the long hours, inflexible deadlines, and other demands they face, this seems a lot to expect of reporters on the go, many of whom seemed inclined by temperament, if not training, toward social action rather than academic analysis. How much more so when the reporter is passionate about her work, operating in a war zone, and using a genre that tests the boundaries between fact and value. It seems reasonable to ask, then, whether reflective equilibrium is a plausible goal, at least in this arena of knowledge-making.

Ward might argue, rightly, that the individual reporter does not work alone; there are, for example, colleagues at her newspaper or media outlet, principally her editor, to help her monitor her ways of seeing. Moreover, if reflective equilibrium is thought of as a “wide” rather than a “narrow” process (Daniels, 2003)—as a collective, multiperspectival approach rather than the endeavour of an individual—one could claim that biases which evade the monitoring of one journalist or newspaper may be counterbalanced by the larger industry, as it affords readers the opportunity to adjust by providing many accounts of the same event. Such resources are no small thing; indeed, they are crucial to our sense that through the diligent application of its methods over time, the press can make a “long-term positive contribution” (Ward, 2004, p. 35) in spite of its fallibility. Yet the availability of such resources may depend too much on a best-case scenario. As we write this article, many media outlets are cutting staff, and ever more newspapers are declaring bankruptcy. Accordingly, the variety of
perspectives offered by the media has almost certainly decreased; we suspect that the
time writers and editors need to reflect has also decreased, indeed, that it has become
an almost unaffordable luxury. Pragmatic objectivity remains in our view a viable
standard for journalism, but the current economic climate may call for an even greater
tolerance of imperfection, and more patience about the unfolding of truth in time.

Notes
1. For the sake of clarity, we have limited the account that follows to The Invention of Journalism Ethics.
Ward’s (2004) position continues to evolve, but his subsequent work represents expansions on and
explorations of ideas in the book rather than departures from them.

2. “[D]espite the movement of journalism away from objectivity, opinion surveys show that a substan-
tial portion of the public continues to expect reporters to provide fair, objective information. ... The
question of objectivity remains vexed, despite the criticism” (Ward, 2004, p. 14).

3. For Ward (2004), passion that impels one to search for truth leads to good journalism, but passion
that guides the search likely does not. The latter—“attached journalism”—promotes “goals that are
narrower than the goal of serving the public or democracy” (p. 312). By contrast, he writes, “Pragmatic
objectivity is a passionate commitment to dispassionate inquiry” (p. 282).

4. For similar comments on objectivity, see Blatchford’s column of April 8, 2006 and “Christie

5. The tone of the attacks posted on the “I hate Christie Blatchford” webpage, not to mention the very
existence of the site, strongly suggests reactions to Blatchford herself rather than her arguments or her

6. The following analysis is, as our title indicates, one reading of Blatchford’s style and ethos; we make
no claims that it captures the “right” or most common response. As Edward Schiappa (2008) has
argued, the assumption that “popular culture texts have a primary, or at least a preferred or dominant,
meaning that a discerning critic can independently determine and analyze” is problematic (p. 10; orig-
inal emphasis).

7. Though Fifteen Days recounts some of the same events covered in Blatchford’s columns, the relation-
ship between the two is complex. We have therefore decided, somewhat reluctantly, that discussion of
Fifteen Days would take us beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing how much
the compositional struggles described in the “Author’s Note”—and indeed the very fact of essaying the
book, trying once again to “get the story right”—recall Ward’s emphasis on diligence over time.

8. In Blatchford’s view, disregard, if not disdain, has long been the attitude of both government and press
oward the military in Canada: “For decades, the press remained resolutely uninterested in the nation’s
military, and this sense, operated hand-in-glove with the government of the day, which, regardless of
political stripe and with few exceptions over my lifetime, has generally behaved as though there was
something a little distasteful and embarrassing about soldiers” (April 27, 2006).

9. Good reporters are also protected from the worst dangers of embeddedness—at home or at war—
by their instincts. They are “always at a slight remove, watching...the sort of people who at a party
are like a cat, sticking to the edges of the room, a bit wary” (May 31, 2008).

10. Whether or not we agree with Blatchford’s views on the issue, it would take us well beyond the
scope of this paper to enter into debate about the purpose and progress of Canada’s mission in
Afghanistan. Our point is simply that there are alternative views, from academics and politicians, that
are well argued and worth hearing, even if their proponents have not visited Afghanistan. See, for
example, James Laxer’s (2008) Mission of Folly: Canada and Afghanistan, as well as Janice Gross Stein
Christie Blatchford references
(2005, July 2). 'I am a fish without a bicycle!'; As a woman who is more or less without a man, I put the pedal to the mettle. Globe and Mail, p. A13.
(2005, October 1). Age cannot wither them; Nor custom stale their infinite variety ... The Stones show their harrowing years, and that's one source of their continuing potency. Globe and Mail, p. A23.
(2006, July 15). An epitaph unworthy of this soldier; We have been collectively careless with Corporal Boneca's memory. Globe and Mail, p. A15.
(2006, September 16). We debate, with guns blazing; But is it informed debate? There is a serious misunderstanding about Canada's mission to Afghanistan. Globe and Mail, p. A19.
(2006, December 19). Laughter, outrage and a call to battle; Canadians find their way amid the noise of what may be the craziest little battleground on the planet. Globe and Mail, p. A19.
(2007, March 23). In all this murkiness, it's hard to tell who the good guys are. Globe and Mail, p. A18.
(2007, September 8). What I won't miss about Afghanistan; Grim conversations, close quarters, fearful locals, constant dehydration: The dust isn't all that gets under your skin. Globe and Mail, p. A23.
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