The "Star" Correspondent and Parachute Diplomacy: CNN's Clarissa Ward in Myanmar and Afghanistan

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This study examines the framing and positioning patterns in CNN Chief International Correspondent Clarissa Ward's on-the-ground coverage of two conflicts in 2021: the February 1st coup in Myanmar and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August. Analyzing this coverage and debates surrounding these contested trips published in commentaries, editorials, and on social media, we find that the political economy and practices of international news reporting resulted in episodically framed stories primarily revolving around Ward as CNN's star correspondent. Ward's parachute journalism underplays the role of Myanmar and Afghan agency by sidelining local journalists and framing local people as victims, while also sidestepping significant structural issues. By capitulating to requirements for access, CNN and Ward implicitly reinforce the legitimacy of both the Myanmar military and the Taliban. Although Ward boldly confronts their spokesmen, the overall framing and positioning implicitly reinforce global (media) imperialist narratives and CNN's branding by centering CNN and Ward's professionalism and role as informal diplomat, sidelining local agency, and diverting focus from the broader historical, political, economic, and foreign policy issues at play.

Keywords: conflict reporting, parachute journalism, parachute diplomacy, celebrity correspondent, political economy, media imperialism, Afghanistan, Myanmar, CNN, Clarissa Ward

In April 2021, two months after the February 1st *coup d'etat* in Myanmar, as the military escalated its killings of unarmed protestors on the streets, CNN's Chief International Correspondent Clarissa Ward was invited into this country, which had banned foreign journalists, igniting both gratitude for the high-profile attention and controversy over the military-monitored, highly restricted trip. Ward's celebrity status was on display again in Afghanistan, where she reported on the Taliban's "front line" in Kandahar and the taking of the capital, Kabul, on August 15, and chose to veil herself from head-to-toe in a black Islamic dress, or "abaya." In both countries, CNN repeatedly touted her reporting as "exclusive." Myanmar activists and

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foreign observers openly questioned the value of Ward's parachute journalism, and while her star status was not questioned in Afghanistan, her choice to wear abaya, CNN's claims of exclusivity, and their editorial lines all provoked controversy.

This article draws from the growing body of critical literature on global journalism to examine the framing and positioning patterns in Ward's on-the-ground coverage of these two cases of high-profile Western parachute journalism of conflicts "over there." We also overview the controversies that unfolded about these trips in commentaries, editorials, and on social media. We argue that Ward's positioning and framing choices function to sideline the vital work of local journalists and activists and produce episodically framed coverage that buries the broader historical, political, economic, and foreign policy issues at play, reinforcing CNN's media branding and global dominance.

Dropzones: Myanmar and Afghanistan

Although Myanmar and Afghanistan are generally peripheral to the interests of Western news audiences, both countries attracted attention in 2021 for the same challenge: violent political crises involving unaccountable militaries.

Myanmar

The February 1, 2021 *coup d'etat* took many by surprise, occurring early on the day the newly elected National League for Democracy government was to convene a new parliament, after a decade of much-lauded "transition" from military rule (2010–2020), during which the media and information landscape changed significantly. Prepublication censorship ended, long-standing taboo topics were breached, and mobile telephony and Internet access skyrocketed. Many exiled media outlets returned. Despite controversies, elections in 2010 were the first many Myanmar people had ever participated in, after the decades of military rule that followed General Ne Win's 1962 coup. Under military rule, the media were heavily censored, and only foreign and exiled media could report freely, especially about the military's brutal suppression of mass dissent, most notably in 1988 and 2007. After losing the elections in 2020, the military staged its coup on the flimsy premise of election fraud. Still, the opening period had provided the people with a taste of freedom that they remained unwilling to forgo. Since then, the military has unleashed an unparalleled level of violence, targeting not only the long-beleaguered ethnic minority groups but for the first time the majority Burmans (Bamar) in central regions and urban areas. Myanmar's independent media sector has largely relocated outside the country since the coup, keeping the news flowing, but the country has again slipped from international news headlines.

Afghanistan

In 1979, Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan to occupy its capital, Kabul, leading more than 5 million to flee into Pakistan. In response, Pakistan, with U.S. support, raised more than 60,000 "Mujahedeen" [holy fighters], launching a proxy "jihad" against the Soviets. This radicalism crippled the local media system in Afghanistan, limiting its jurisdiction to Kabul. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 led the United States to leave, but the violence continued throughout the 1990s as these

"Mujahedeen" targeted U.S. interests under the banner of Al-Qaida and its local successors, the Taliban. This led the United States to attack Afghanistan in 2001, dubbing Al-Qaida a terrorist organization responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The United States and its NATO allies formed a new Kabul-based government and funded the growth of local media, but this infrastructure crumbled on August 15, 2021, when the United States withdrew after its 2020 peace deal, leaving the Taliban in control of Kabul. Half of Afghanistan's 547 media outlets were shut down; 60% of the country's media professionals fled the country (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Around that same time, well-resourced foreign journalists flew into Kabul to report, including CNN's Clarissa Ward, the quintessential "star" correspondent.

Branding the Transnational "Star" Correspondent

War correspondents have been popular in Western media since the so-called "golden era" of war reporting—from the late 19th century to the First World War—when an unprecedented growth in frontline news production and global bureaus led to the emergence of this intrepid figure, "the hero of his own story" (Knightely, 2004, p. 129). These reporters tend to position themselves as self-sufficient, independent of the political economy of global news production and its economic and political constraints on their coverage (Ashraf, 2021; Knightely, 2004; Palmer, 2018). The rapidly evolving political economy of journalism has rendered such news gathering models financially unsustainable, and forced corporate news media to cut offshore bureaus to lower expenses. The foreign war correspondent has now been largely replaced by less experienced—and less expensive—*parachute journalists*, who move from one country to another, filling the gaps in their knowledge by hiring local news reporters, often called "fixers" (Ashraf, 2021; Palmer, 2019).

As competition blurs the line between news and entertainment, celebrity appeal becomes a strategic marketing and branding tool, raising the entry costs required to attract news audiences. Palmer (2018) notes that "when news bureaus had closed around the world, celebrity reporters acted as the branding faces of their news outlets, linking their news studios to the conflict zones that they could no longer cover on a regular basis" (p. 116). CNN was a frontrunner, leveraging "a new style of reporting" focusing "more on 'liveness'—on the televisual simulation of temporal and spatial instantaneity" (Palmer, 2018, p. 29). This approach sidelines the context necessary to understand complex situations and echoes concerns that celebrity culture is detrimental to the values of democracy (Marks & Fischer, 2002; Palmer, 2018). This trend also creates what Hamilton (2010) calls a "side benefit, for a small subset of journalists—bringing celebrity returns to the work of reporting" (p. 653)—while concealing complex labor conditions. Although Palmer (2018) refers to noncelebrity reporters as "neoliberal subjects of late capitalism" (p. 161), Ward is also a cog in this machine, playing her part well. Yet, although all contemporary war reporters operate in dangerous environments, "star" parachute reporters typically have the support of full crews, large corporate media outlets, and the political structures these media represent.

Parachute Diplomacy: CNN's Media Imperialism

As foreign bureaus close and media globally become increasingly commercialized, foreign correspondents are often positioned as nonstate actors, promoting the national values of their governments worldwide. The media corporations employing them also contribute to "imperial projects of major states that aim to increase their geopolitical power vis-à-vis other states" (Ampuja, Koivisto, &

Nordenstreng, 2020, p. 32; Seib, 2010). In today's mainstream transnational media, these states and their agents are often framed as "defenders of 'freedom,' 'free trade,' 'civilization,' 'economic development,' 'the national interest,' 'women's rights,' 'human rights,' 'peace,' and so on" (Ampuja et al., 2020, pp. 37–38). CNN is perhaps the quintessential example of U.S. media imperialism, as "the United States remains the world's single largest center of media power and wealth" (Boyd-Barrett, 2020, p. 21). With its 24/7 news cycle and global foreign affairs focus, CNN came to embody the notion of a "media-driven foreign policy," giving rise to what some scholars have dubbed the "CNN effect" (Robinson, 2005, p. 344). Nevertheless, CNN has faced significant financial difficulties and has had to gradually reduce its spending by laying off foreign bureau staffers, reportedly losing U.S. $10 million annually (Waterson, 2019, para. 3).

Thus, although the use of parachute journalists helps news outlets survive, unlike local media, parachute journalists seldom capture "the local cultural epistemologies" (Salovaara-Moring, 2009, p. 350), given their limited understanding of local history, culture, and geography, resulting in decontextualized coverage and a simplified, binary worldview justified in the name of journalistic "objectivity." Adding to this is the tendency of commercial news to highlight irrational aspects of violence while obscuring any "exploration of the goals of outside interventionists" (Salovaara-Moring, 2009, p. 363). War is thus constructed as spontaneous, "a dramatic media event without preludes" (Salovaara-Moring, 2009, p. 358), with its coverage lacking any reference to its complicated history (Khan, Faizullah, & Ashraf, 2023). Because news outlets ignore the structural causes and consequences of powerful countries' interventions, foreign news reporting tends to limit its framing to warring parties' claims, counterclaims, military movements, civilian casualties, and material destruction. By offering a positioning and framing analysis of Ward's 2021 coverage of these two countries, we demonstrate how our two cases compare with these earlier findings.

Methods

We conducted a textual analysis using framing and positioning to understand how CNN and Ward represent the key players in the stories covered here and whose interests those representations serve. Similar to the common method of *framing analysis*, *positioning theory* examines identity construction and the establishment of *selves* "in jointly produced storylines" (Davies & Harre, 1990, as cited in Gordon, 2015, p. 331), while *framing* focuses on the construction of *specific situations*. Positioning theory also helps us assess *repositioning* and *rhetorical redescription* strategies actors use to justify their actions and "change the moral or agentive authority of [their]... policies in public, institutional discourse" (Miller, 2010, p. 726). We understand framing and positioning to be mutually co-constitutive: *positioning* characterizes the key players involved and, in this way, constructs a particular *framing* of the situation, establishing the context in which this positioning makes sense, especially when a situation is contested (Gordon, 2015). Using this approach, we analyze how Ward positions herself and others in this coverage and what worldview her framing functions to reinforce.

We analyze Ward's reports sourced while in-country, even if they aired after the CNN team left. One exception is Ward's initial Myanmar coup report on February 17, before her trip to the country (CNN, 2021a). The other Myanmar reports include two packages that aired on April 5th while the team was in

the country (CNN, 2021b, 2021c): an April 8th story after they had left (CNN, 2021d) and an April 11th final story (CNN, 2021e). The Afghanistan coverage in this article includes 10 reports that aired between August 6 and April 22, the first two before the Taliban entered Kabul (CNN, 2021f, 2021g), and the last after Ward and her crew left Kabul, and she was reporting from her home in France (CNN, 2021o). We only include stand-ups incorporated into reports or followed by them; repeat broadcasts are not taken into consideration. We also examine local media coverage, Ward's own tweets, and other social media posts discussing these trips.

Parachuting Into Myanmar

CNN was offered an enticing opportunity—a trip to Myanmar arranged by infamous Israeli-Canadian lobbyist Ari Ben-Menashe, reportedly paid U.S$2 million by the Myanmar junta to improve its image (Lewis, 2021)—an arrangement never revealed in Ward's reporting.[1] Before this, Ward's first report on the February 1 coup had aired more than two weeks later, on February 17, from her home, and it focused on the growing protests, gunfire, tanks on Myanmar's streets, and the UN's warning of a possible "bloodbath" (CNN, 2021a, 00:02:26). The report uses footage from AFPTV and Reuters gathered by local journalists, as well as content from the ethnic media outlet *Myitkyina News Journal* and Twitter, highlighting the network's reliance on local reporters in its coverage of postcoup Myanmar.

Then, on March 30, Ward tweets a photo of a boarding pass from Seoul to Yangon with the hashtags #ontheroad #myanmar (Ward, 2021), prompting both grateful and cynical responses, including concerns that CNN might be misled by the military regime. Ward's next tweet, on April 5, shares her first report from inside Myanmar (CNN, 2021b). On April 6, Ward posts three tweets clarifying that CNN's crew had left the country.

Ward in Myanmar: The Intrepid Foreign Correspondent and CNN's "Scoop"

CNN's coverage positions Ward as bravely providing the world with "exclusive" information about Myanmar. Her first story, on April 5, begins with anchor John Berman announcing, "a CNN exclusive this morning, remarkable access inside Myanmar" (CNN, 2021b, 00:00:02) where at least 550 protestors have been killed and thousands arrested, including at least eleven "minutes after being interviewed by CNN" (00:00:021). He acknowledges that CNN is there "with the permission of the military" (00:00:30), and Ward adds, "simply put, John, no other international journalists have been allowed into Myanmar since this coup happened" (00:01:30). These claims of a "CNN exclusive" also appear prominently in on-screen graphics, online titles, and voice-overs in subsequent stories (CNN, 2021c, 2021d).

Yet traveling in the same military convoy as the CNN crew, also invited by Ben-Menashe, were journalist Allegra Mendelson and her colleague from the regional outlet *Southeast Asia Globe*. They were reporting for *Al Jazeera* and the *Washington Post*, backed by the Pulitzer Center (McCready, 2021). In an April 8th article for *Vice*, "How CNN's Myanmar Trip Started a Debate Over Parachute Journalism,"

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[1] Menashe is well known to have worked for some of the world's most brutal dictators, including Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and Libyan general Khalifa Haftar.

regionally based reporters Heather Chen and Joe Freeman joined others already pointing out the hypocrisy of CNN's claim of exclusivity and their omission of the involvement of lobbyist Ben-Menashe (Chen & Freeman, 2021). Although CNN remained largely unresponsive to these critiques, the *Globe*'s editor immediately wrote about their decision to enter the country and organized a webinar to discuss the emerging controversies (Haffner, 2021).

Criticisms of Ward's trip had spread on social media by the time she reported her third story from London on August 8. Here, for the first time, she briefly acknowledges the contributions of local journalists. "Fearless local journalists and activists have risked everything to show the world what is happening" (CNN, 2021d, 00:02:00), she says, before immediately diverting the focus, "while outside access to the country has been blocked. But now the military has granted CNN the first access to visit Myanmar" (CNN, 2021d, 00:02:08). The coverage largely ignores the contributions of local, regional, and even foreign journalists remaining in the country, reinforcing the misleading image of Ward as a lone foreign correspondent with access to "exclusive" insights into Myanmar people's experiences.

The Myanmar People: Dying to be Heard

Ward positions Myanmar people as vulnerable, defiant, and brave, risking incredible danger to speak to CNN, tell their stories, and flash the three-finger Hunger Games salute, yet requiring external assistance to tell these stories. Ward reports that "one woman actually ran after me while we were still at the market, trembling like a leaf, on the phone with someone who said that three people we'd spoken to had already been arrested" (CNN, 2021b, 00:03:53). Heightening the tension, Ward frames the people's bravery as a reflection of both their engagement in the struggle and their desperate desire for a foreign figure to act on their behalf. Ward embraces this role, at times whispering on camera, so her observations of people's defiant behaviors remain "secret" from her military handlers.

Although CNN played up the arrests of local people who spoke with Ward, they acknowledged no responsibility for these events, framing the Myanmar people as uniformly in favor of their presence and either ignoring or responding defensively to criticism. On April 6, Ward responded to those critiquing the neocolonial logic of her reporting practices, as she tweeted:

> Very striking that I am being absolutely inundated with positive, heartfelt messages from people in Myanmar, while a handful of white male academics/commentators (none of them in the country) write endless screeds about how offensive my trip is to the people of Myanmar. (Ward, 2021)

Ward's positioning of the Myanmar people as distinct from her critics and her use of gender and race as a defense were immediately debunked by a flurry of critical responses from Myanmar journalists and commentators, many of them women.

Perhaps in response to these critiques, Ward and CNN explicitly frame the trip as responsible journalism. In the April 5th story, Ward responds to anchor John Berman's question about those detained.

This was a very distressing incident, John. One day we were finally allowed to go to a public space, to an open market. And it's important to underscore here that *we have not solicited any contact with any activist, with anyone who is part of the protest movement because we know, given the context that we're here in, just how dangerous that could be*. However, when we took our cameras out in this market and started shooting video, people started coming up to us…. and started telling us their stories. They told us they were frightened. They told us there is no peace there. And *we let them say their piece. We felt it was important to give them the opportunity to have their side of the story on the record*. (CNN, 2021b, 00:03:00; emphasis added)

Ward positions Myanmar people as active agents who risk defying the military to share their story but who also lack the means to tell this story "on the record," with CNN the sole outlet making this possible. This coverage sensationalizes the agency of local people who risk speaking to Ward despite their vulnerability, while simultaneously minimizing the agency and contributions of local and regional journalists and other critics of CNN's trip and coverage.

This framing, along with CNN's agreement to the trip under severe movement restrictions, functions to inflate CNN's and Ward's roles while arguably legitimizing the Myanmar military as the country's primary powerbroker.

The Myanmar Military: The Evil "Other"

Ward's genuinely exclusive opportunity was to direct hard-hitting questions to military spokesman Zaw Min Tun, yet she allowed him a platform to try to reposition the Myanmar military and parrot the party line with little or no follow-up. Ward challenges Zaw Min Tun about the arrests of people who talked to CNN in the market, asking, "Can you please explain why you would be arresting people for talking to us? What possible crime did these people commit?" (CNN, 2021b, 00:04:44). The camera cuts to Zaw Min Tun, who says through an interpreter,

They haven't committed any crime…. The security forces were worried that they would provoke others and start the protest in the market. And that is why they got arrested. However, the government is arranging to release them as soon as possible. (CNN, 2021b, 00:04:53)

Ward's report includes no challenges or follow-ups.

In what Ward further describes to the CNN anchor as "a pretty uncomfortable interview, to be honest" (CNN, 2021c, 00:05:43), she confronts Zaw Min Tun with a video she describes as "a young activist being killed in cold blood, to give him a chance to explain how on earth such a brutal killing could possibly be justified. Take a look" (00:06:12). The screen cuts to a video, by that time already viral, showing soldiers on the back of a pickup truck shooting at three young men driving by on a motorbike. One of the young men falls to the ground, and two run away, pursued by soldiers. The screen shifts back to Ward, sternly addressing Zaw Min Tun, "You can see the police shoot him on the spot. His autopsy later said that he

suffered brain injuries as a result of a cycling accident, which I think we can all see, that's not a cycling accident. How do you explain this?" (00:06:34). Frowning and visibly uncomfortable, Zaw Min Tun says the videos will be investigated to see "if the video is real or not" (00:07:05), adding that "our forces have no intention to shoot innocent people" (00:07:11). This is one of three reports in which he denies that security forces intend to shoot people and is given the platform to reposition the victims as "terrorists," claiming "the terrorists… are trying to make us look bad" (CNN, 2021d, 00:09:47). Ward does not challenge him, including on claims that the videos may not be real, as noted by a Twitter poster (using a Burmese name in Burmese script). "She let them tarnish the credibility of that video when ZMT [Zaw Min Tun] mentioned they had to check if it's real. Was it intentional? At her level, it has to be!" the tweet argues (A Linn Yaung, 2021).

Although Ward does not further challenge Zaw Min Tun directly, she does undermine his attempts to reposition the military by using irony to challenge the 'official' version with other evidence and her own observations. Despite his efforts to reposition the military as reasonable and vital for security in the face of an unruly mob, for example, Ward points out the disconnect between the military's "parade" of evidence and the realities on the ground and historically.

The Myanmar military is clearly positioned here as the perpetrator of unjustifiable brutality in its killings of unarmed protestors, the evil "other" in this narrative of simple binaries. By implication, the coverage positions the Burmese people and those supporting them, including CNN and the United States, as virtuous.

Positioning the United States

This coverage positions the United States not as a central player but rather as a benevolent observer, almost entirely ignoring U.S. foreign policy in response to the coup and its aftermath. In a rare and brief mention of policy during Ward's April 8 story, anchor Jake Tapper notes that Myanmar's UN envoy had called for sanctions and asks about their potential impact. Ward brushes this off:

> Well there are already sanctions levied against the junta by the US, the UK, and the European Union but the reality is sanctions don't give the kind of leverage that is really needed now to have a meaningful impact, and so far we just haven't seen that meaningful, united response from the international community. (CNN, 2021d, 00:12:21)

None of her other reports discuss sanctions already enacted or debates about additional U.S. sanctions or U.S. foreign policy decisions. It is only on April 27—well after she leaves Myanmar—that Ward makes any further mention of U.S. policy, but then pivots to protests against arms sales to Myanmar by Russia, China, and India. Absent is any mention of major international oil and gas companies, such as U.S.-based Chevron, which profit millions from operations in Myanmar, or that gas sales represent the junta's largest source of foreign revenue (Reuters, 2021; Rushe, Mathiason, & O'Sullivan, 2023). By avoiding any serious debate about U.S. involvement in Myanmar, this coverage positions the United States as a benevolent and sympathetic bystander, a framing pattern repeated in CNN's coverage of Afghanistan.

Ward and CNN in Afghanistan: Parachuting From the Frontline

In August 2021, Clarissa Ward traveled to Afghanistan to report on the U.S. military's departure from the country as part of the 2020 peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban. Ward traveled to the two frontline provinces of Kandahar and Ghazni for her first two reports (CNN, 2021f, 2021g) focusing on the U.S.-backed Ashraf Ghani regime's failure to stop the Taliban's "brutal" country-wide assault. Yet Ward's own on-the-ground presence remains CNN's overarching framing device.

A Star Shines: Ward as a Lone Star War Correspondent

Ward is clearly positioned here as CNN's star reporter, its anchors calling her "extraordinary," "intrepid," "amazing," "great," and "courageous." She is framed as the network's key expert on the Taliban takeover, at times as more knowledgeable than anyone else. CNN star anchor Andersen Cooper tells Ward that the Taliban's "track record, as you know better than anybody, is pretty horrific" (CNN, 2021i, 00:04:36). Presenting herself as a staunch voice for the Afghan people, she relays through her own emotional explanations their fears about both the Taliban and abandonment by the withdrawing United States. Anchor Jake Tapper enthuses, "your reporting has been brave and amazing and with empathy and with courage and we are so lucky to have you as a colleague" (CNN, 2021n, 00:08:44). Ward is also positioned as a potential target of the Taliban's ire. For example, the day after the fall of Kabul, anchor Brianna Keilar asks Ward, "Is it safe there? Is it less safe for you?" (CNN, 2021h, 00:07:39). Framing Ward as endangered diverts attention from the real threats facing others still in Kabul, constructing a binary that positions Ward as both exceptional and uniquely at risk in opposition to the Taliban.

Ward's reporting is in many ways exceptional. She offers close-up, graphic images of the war, often more daringly than other journalists, a framing CNN celebrates (CNN, 2021f, 2021g, 2021h). Highlighting Ward's presence on Kabul's risky streets soon after the Taliban's arrival reinforces this framing (CNN, 2021m). From the vicinity of the Kabul airport on August 18, Ward notes the "pretty large crowd who's formed around us already… [because] this is a slightly unusual situation to be doing live shots from here…. It's definitely chaotic, it's definitely dangerous" (CNN, 2021l, 00:01:08). Later, loud gunshots ring out, and Ward ducks in front of the live camera, saying, "When there are bullets firing like that, it is clearly not a game" (CNN, 2021l, 00:01:36). By providing on-the-scene images and sound and vividly conveying the desperation of those caught up in this conflict, Ward positions herself (and is positioned and framed by CNN) as a distinctively brave correspondent, putting herself in harm's way to bring her audiences compelling news.

CNN's coverage, promotional materials, and taglines all portray Ward as a lone journalist, or at best, as if a small CNN crew is entirely accountable for this reporting, which is somehow "exclusive." In two of these stories, a man who seems familiar with the local setting in Kabul clearly guides Ward and her crew, remaining unacknowledged (CNN, 2021g, 2021m). Elsewhere, walking through the scattered rubble of an abandoned U.S. base outside of Kabul, Ward shares in her voice-over that she and an "award winning Afghan journalist, Najeebullah Qureshi" (CNN, 2021g, 00:00:37) had been invited by the Taliban, who wanted to "show off" (00:00:39) their spoils of the war. CNN's tagline nevertheless predictably frames the

package as "exclusive." Although not possible without the help of local people, this reporting does not acknowledge such support, thus reinforcing Ward's (lone) star status.

Once the Taliban seizes control of Kabul, Ward reinforces her exceptionalism by deciding to wear the traditional black burqa, or abaya, a wraparound garment worn by Afghan women, particularly in rural regions. She wears an abaya in all her reports, except when inside the Kabul airport, interviewing Afghan women in their houses, or speaking on camera with CNN anchors out of the Afghan public eye. On August 16, CNN presenter Brianna Keilar notes, "Your dress code has clearly changed in the last day since the Taliban took over Kabul… Is it safe there?" (CNN, 2021h, 00:07:34). Ward replies, "Well we have been told that we are free to report here" (CNN, 2021h, 00:07:52). Except occasionally, she maintains, "my gender does flummox them" (CNN, 2021b, 00:07: 52). In an August 17th interview in *Slate*, Ward explains that she is wearing abaya differently than Afghan women, who prefer to keep their hair loose, and suggests that access to the Taliban supersedes other concerns (Ismail, 2021). "I haven't been dressed conservatively because I have been told to by them" (Ismail, 2021, para. 8), she explains. "It's really not a big deal to cover my hair completely or wear an abaya if it means that a Taliban fighter will talk to me" (Ismail, 2021, para. 8). Ward prioritizes this access for professional reasons, setting herself apart not only from other journalists, but also from the Afghan women whose stories she is telling.

Representing Afghan People's Fear in Taliban-Ruled Kabul

Ward clearly positions local people as victims of a fundamentalist militia. She uses their precariousness as the primary framing device, connecting their fear to the terror and humanitarian crisis inflicted by the Taliban, to being abandoned by their U.S. or UN employers, and for the lucky few, to fear of the unknown as they leave on large U.S. planes (CNN, 2021m, 2021n). When the Taliban are far from Kabul, Ward's focus is the fight between the Taliban and Afghan state forces (CNN, 2021g), and she frames the Afghans as casualties of the war and its uncertainties (CNN, 2021f). Once the Taliban takes over Kabul, the focus on local people's fear intensifies. "The story today is about people who aren't out on the street" (CNN, 2021h, 00:02:03), Ward says the day after Kabul fell. "People don't feel safe" (CNN, 2021h, 00:02:07), she reports while driving around the city showing images of jubilant, gun-wielding Taliban.

Ward frames local people as affected not only by fear but also by the mayhem brought about by the chaotic U.S. withdrawal and rapid Taliban takeover (CNN, 2021g, 2021h, 2021j). On August 16, Ward responds to the CNN anchor's question about the situation at Kabul's airport, saying, "It was mayhem…. you have people driving down the wrong side of the road…. scenes of chaos, this crush of people" (CNN, 2021h, 00:04:11). Unable to determine the source of some unidentified shooting, Ward says, "it's not clear whether it's targeting somebody or whether it was simply someone trying to scatter the crowd" (CNN, 2021h, 00:04:16), concluding that "the chaos was too much" (00:04:24). Accompanying footage shows crowds (primarily men) running in the streets or at the airport, many clinging desperately to taxiing U.S. planes.

Prominent in this coverage is Ward's emphasis on Afghan women, including her choice to wear the abaya and to wear it conservatively. The only Afghans identified as professionals in this coverage are two women Ward speaks with in a report from the women's quarters of a private home, one identifying herself

as a former UN employee and the other as a politician. Ward summarizes what the women tell her about why girls will no longer be going to school: Because "the Taliban says it's bad" (CNN, 2021g, 00:04:19). On the day after the Taliban takeover, Ward discusses the "largely silent" (CNN, 2021h, 00:02:23) majority in the country fearful of speaking out. Anchor Brianna Keilar replies that she had tried to include some Afghan women on the show that day, but "they're just too terrified" (CNN, 2021h, 00:02:56). Ward then lauds the "outspoken… incredibly strong, brilliant women" (CNN, 2021h, 00:03:26) judges, politicians, journalists, and others who fear becoming targets and notes the sudden public appearance of many more abaya as a manifestation of this fear. Ward draws on widely circulated symbolic associations of the abaya, or burqa, framing it as a leading gendered sign of the Taliban's oppression, a compulsory dress code for all women. Without acknowledging her own choice as unnecessarily conservative, she highlights how Kabul's burqa businesses are flourishing while other businesses are on the decline. "The Taliban took over and all the women are afraid, so that is why they are all coming in and buying burqas" (CNN, 2021k, 00:00:35), Ward says. The framing evokes Orientalist images that echo the official U.S. discourse propagated after 9/11, when the media generated arguments about liberating women that were then used as a cynical ploy to help legitimize the U.S. "War on Terror" (Stabile & Kumar, 2005).[2] This framing also offers a contrast to Ward's ability to move around relatively freely, including choosing to dress conservatively to promote her professional interests.

The Afghan people in this coverage are mostly interviewed on the streets, in camps for displaced people, or at the airport while fleeing the country, all framed primarily as victims living precarious lives. Everyday people are framed as using whatever means necessary to survive, escape the country, and protect themselves, for example, by waiting outside the airport, wearing an abaya in public, and speaking to CNN in the hopes that their stories will be told. They are framed as more moderate than the fundamentalist Taliban and as victims of a chaotic, dangerous situation, struggling to survive the disorder following the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover.

The Taliban and its 'Bizarre World'

The Taliban is positioned here as the cause of ongoing chaos and fear, despite Ward's occasional episodic framing of its fighters as individually friendly and working to restore order. She also frames them as sexist, unpredictable, lacking "a huge amount of discipline" (CNN, 2021l, 00:02:22), decidedly anti-American, and the key oppressors of Afghan women. Standing in front of a group of Taliban fighters, Ward notes that "some carry American weapons… [and] tell us they are here to maintain law and order" (CNN, 2021h, 00:00:26). She asks a Taliban commander, "What is your message to America?" (00:00:41). He replies, "America has already spent enough time in Afghanistan. They need to leave" (00:00:44). The commander's contingent then chants a flurry of slogans. "They are just chanting death to America" (00:01.05), Ward says, "but they seem friendly at the same time… It's utterly bizarre" (00:01:08). Two days later, when CNN's host asks Ward about international media reports that the Taliban is targeting people at the airport, she avoids blaming the militia. "They are firing to disperse the crowd" (CNN, 2021l, 00:02:08), Ward says. "They are not targeting people" (00:02:10). Ward positions the Taliban as undisciplined and dangerous but also as the force that must restore order.

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[2] We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for this point and a few others incorporated here.

Ward's framing of the Taliban as oppressive to women is often personal, as when they deny her entry into the deserted presidential palace. After the Taliban asks her to move aside from the entrance, she does so, cautiously saying into the camera, "They just told me to stand to the side because I am a woman" (CNN, 2021h, 00:01:26). CNN then makes that the story's peg line (CNN, 2021h). In a chaotic scene near the airport, Ward reports that one soldier "told me to cover my face" (CNN, 2021m, 00:00:42). In positioning the Afghan people and herself as victims of the Taliban and its conservatism, which she (however inadvertently) reinforces by her decision to wear abaya conservatively, Ward both explicitly and implicitly reinforces the Taliban's positioning as oppressors.

Framing the Taliban's conquest of their own country as the cause of the conflict and focusing on the immediate potential bodily threat and fear they engender, this coverage avoids the deeper context from which their militancy emerged as a "brutal" (CNN, 2021g, 00:00:02) force. This maneuver sidelines how the United States is implicated in creating the Taliban, as well as the superpower's failure to defeat terrorism. It also positions the United States as holding the moral high ground by working to protect individual Afghans against the dangers posed by the Taliban, reinforcing the framing of the militants as incapable of creating stability. Positioning the Taliban in this way also implies that the United States is the stable counterpart to the Taliban's chaos, despite its rapid withdrawal.

The United States: An Absent Savior?

Although Ward comments passionately on the disastrous consequences of the United States' rapid withdrawal, this coverage largely frames the United States as a benevolent savior, despite its absence. Ward films her first report on the Taliban's siege of Kandahar from an abandoned wedding hall providing cover for Afghani soldiers battling the militia (CNN, 2021f). She frames the United States in reference to its withdrawal and lack of backup air support for the Afghani soldiers, her voice-over clarifying that "US airstrikes only come in an emergency… the rest of the time it is up to [the Afghan troops] to hold the line" (CNN, 2021f, 00:01: 12). Ward then voices the translated words of an Afghan soldier saying that their troops feel "weak" (00:01:21) without U.S. air support, "but this is our soil. We have to defend it" (00:01:24). Ward reports her second package from an abandoned U.S. military facility seized by the Taliban in Ghazni province, openly questioning the value of the U.S. mission in the country (CNN, 2021g). Surveying the abandoned equipment and debris, she says, "America's great experiment into nation building has now vanished into dust" (CNN, 2021g, 00:01:42). Ward then quotes a former U.S. soldier once stationed there who told her about colleagues he lost and his frustration at seeing it all abandoned so abruptly: "'What an unbelievable waste.' Those were his words" (CNN, 2021g, 00:05:28). When a Taliban commander tells her he believes one day the militia will have spread Islamic law "all over the world…we are not in a hurry" (00:02:01), CNN highlights this quote in the story's headline. Yet neither Ward nor any CNN anchor follows up, for example, by pointing out that one of the major U.S. justifications for withdrawal was that the Taliban would not allow the (mis)use of Afghanistan's soil for attacks on other countries.

CNN frames the chaotic withdrawal as provoking a diplomatic responsibility for the United States—for example, when Ward speaks with former U.S. employees waiting on the street, unable to get into the airport, and described as desperate to escape to freedom in the United States. Ward speaks with Afghan men who cannot get into the airport because of missing documents, as well as others who have all the

required documents (CNN, 2021l). As the crowd closes in, wanting to share their stories, the CNN anchor highlights the danger and checks on her safety, then says to Ward, "what we are seeing is the *disconnect* between what the United States says is happening and needs to happen, with what *can* happen" (CNN, 2021l, 00:06:50). This highlights the plight of the "thousands of Afghans the United States has promised to get out of the country" (00:07:04) who cannot enter the airport. That same day, Ward also interviews Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby, who reaffirms the U.S. commitment to Afghan allies. In "Clarissa Ward to Pentagon: I'm the one who has to look our allies in the eyes" (CNN, 2021j, 00:00:31), she confronts Kirby with that phrase, asking for his guarantee that she can tell them that "everyone who has worked with American organizations will be got[ten] out of this country safely" (00:00:32). He answers that the United States will do everything they can for those who apply, committing extra troops and planes to get them out. Kirby reaffirms that the U.S. administration "at the top levels… [is] …absolutely committed" (00:03:28) to rescuing those Afghans who worked with them. These stories not only serve to enhance CNN's and Ward's credibility as they confront U.S. officials, but are also examples of CNN's power to intervene in policy issues while giving Kirby a platform to reassure the audience that all is well; redirect attention from the stunningly chaotic U.S. withdrawal; and reinforce the notion that the United States is cognizant of the dangerously building situation. CNN's influence here is broader than an "effect," reinforcing the argument that the network is symbiotic with state power in mutually reinforcing their global hegemony.

CNN's overall positioning of the United States as an absent savior is accomplished with anecdotes framing U.S. soldiers, politicians, and journalists like Ward as heroes, despite the sudden, chaotic withdrawal. This framing is perhaps most visible in Ward's reporting on her last days at Kabul's airport and on board a giant U.S. military plane full of displaced Afghans (CNN, 2021o). On the 21st, Ward paints a visual narrative of the U.S. troops providing aid to hundreds of Afghans "waiting in the blistering heat hoping for a fly out" (CNN, 2021n, 00:00:11). "The crush of desperate people" (00:00:25) struggling to enter the airport is quite "intense," and Ward notes that "everybody here is doing their best but it's not clear if it is fast enough, if enough people can get out and how much longer they have to finish this massive operation" (00:00:26). Later that day, CNN anchors describe seeing pictures of U.S. servicemen the Pentagon had made public. "We saw… the marine holding a baby, another fist bumping a child…directing women where to go for processing" (00:03:54). This emotional, episodic construction of U.S. troops' "compassion," framed from the perspective of individual soldiers facing ethically challenging situations, functions to divert attention from U.S. policy choices. It also contrasts the United States with the fundamentalist Taliban, portraying the United States as the land where those who desire freedom wish to flee. By focusing on Kabul's collapse—and eventual Taliban rule—as a threat to Afghan forces and people, avoiding historical context, and presenting episodic tales of helpful U.S. soldiers, officials, and journalists, CNN diverts attention from the United States's inability to eliminate "terrorism" from the country.

Parachuting in: Celebrity, Simplicity, and Spin

This study examines how Ward's coverage of the 2021 political crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar frames the events and positions the key players involved, reinforcing previous findings about the informal public diplomacy role of major media outlets while also exposing the shortcomings of contemporary parachute journalism. The coverage positions CNN and Ward as the "gold standard" of corporate

transnational news production and as unofficial U.S. representatives, with Ward serving as its exceptionally skilled chief international correspondent.

Our analysis is not meant to detract from Ward's accomplishments, but rather to question the age of neoliberal transnational news production in which she thrives as the quintessential parachute journalist and unofficial diplomat. Ward's reporting is widely lauded, and she is adored by many in the countries she reports on. She is also quite bold at times, taking risks not only by approaching the Taliban and the Myanmar military, but also the Afghan and Myanmar people on dangerous streets. Notwithstanding her personal accomplishments, Ward's case illustrates how the "star" system in journalism structurally determines corporate news networks' rhetorical strategies, resulting in simplistic, binary narratives that propel the network's market logic and do little to inform the public.[3]

Context is the first to fall prey to this commercial logic and its "star" correspondent. The lack of historical nuance that permeates this coverage is exemplified by CNN and Ward's simplistic portrayal of the Taliban and the Myanmar military as the villains, diverting attention from the U.S. role in these countries and ceding legitimacy to these powerful players, in part by undermining or ignoring local professionalism. The episodic framing of the many anecdotes Ward shares and the clichéd focus on local people's overwhelming fear function to downplay local agency and the broader context in both situations, obscuring how both political crises are connected to larger geopolitical maneuvers. Missing, for example, is the context in which the United States has long been implicated in Afghanistan, given that the Taliban entered Kabul in August 2021 with the consent of U.S. officials. Positioning the Taliban as responsible for "this new bizarre world" (CNN, 2021h, 00:02:39) obscures the U.S. role in the conflict. The U.S. role in Myanmar is less fraught, but the coverage almost entirely omits any discussion of U.S. foreign policy options in response to the military's violence. There is no mention of the strategies promoted by the Burmese at the time, their critique of massive U.S. fossil fuel and telecommunication investments in Myanmar, or the subsequent dangers to the Myanmar people.[4] CNN's coverage strips these stories of important details and avoids potential discomfort for CNN's audience, reinforcing U.S. hegemony through its framing of the United States as a benevolent outsider, rather than the key player it is in both countries.

Although many in Afghanistan and Myanmar expressed gratitude to Ward and CNN for drawing attention to their predicaments, our analysis substantiates criticisms that surfaced, especially concerning Myanmar, from local and regional journalists and activists. They critiqued how the CNN crew endangered local people while making Ward the "star," the coverage's imperial tone, and the marginalization of local and regional journalists. They also argued that CNN's coverage did not provide any information that was not already covered by local and regional journalists. Even the chance to challenge the junta spokesman

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[3] Such simplistic and often sensationalistic narratives can also be misleading. Clarissa Ward came under fire on December 11, 2024, for staging an event in which she and her team were filmed releasing a "prisoner" from dictator Bashar Assad's jail following the fall of Damascus, Syria. CNN later retracted the story after a Syrian fact-checking site revealed that the 'freed' man was actually one of Assad's henchmen, not an innocent prisoner.

[4] One such horrific example is the Myanmar military's manipulation of Facebook to provoke a genocide against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim population in 2017.

on-camera yielded CNN and its audience nothing beyond the official military line, yet by capitulating to the Myanmar regime's limitations on their reporting, the network reinforced the generals' legitimacy.

Ward's coverage of Afghanistan was criticized by Associated Press fact checkers for editorializing and for her on-camera appropriation of abaya without context, a choice that complicates Ward's use of gendered symbolism and arguably centers her as the story (Associated Press, 2021). In the United States, her clothing choice provoked controversy from the political right when Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz claimed she was a "cheerleader" (Ismail, 2021, para. 9) for the Taliban. Given the *abaya-as-opression* trope, Ward's choice to wear the garment more conservatively than local women functions, however inadvertently, to uphold the Taliban's patriarchy by normalizing its most traditional form so prominently. This framing also contrasts with Ward's choice to wear an abaya, which allows her professional access to the Taliban.

CNN's persistent, problematic claims of "exclusivity" function to render less valuable the often precarious labor of local and regional journalists, whose reporting makes CNN's form of corporate transnational journalism and Clarissa Ward's "star value" possible. This neocolonial pattern of marginalization is gaining scholarly attention but is largely masked in news reporting through the narrow lens of parachute journalism (Ashraf, 2021). The coverage sidelines other potentially uncomfortable issues, such as the role of U.S. foreign policy in these complex global conflicts. Although Ward's reporting is often brave and confrontational, the framing centers on her actions and role as an informal diplomat, diverting attention from the broader historical, political, economic, and foreign policy issues at play, and employing episodic framing and problematic Orientalist tropes that reinforce CNN's media branding.

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