



## THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

May 9, 2003

***Media Correspondent Terence Smith speaks to New York Times Executive Editor Howell Raines about the resignation of former reporter Jayson Blair amid charges of plagiarism, and how his paper is handling the situation.***

TERENCE SMITH: New York Times reporter Jayson Blair resigned last week, amid charges he plagiarized parts of an April 26 story about the family of a missing American soldier in Iraq, Edward Anguiano, who was later found dead.

Parts of the story were lifted almost word-for-word from an April 18 article in The San Antonio Express News. The soldier's family also said Blair never visited them, though his story and dateline said he did. Robert Rivard, editor of the Express News, alerted the top editors at the Times, including the paper's chief, Howell Raines, to the apparent plagiarism.

Resigning on May 1, the 27-year-old Blair apologized for his "lapse in journalistic integrity."

Examinations of Blair's work by other papers also showed that Blair might have fabricated other stories as well. To find out, the Times has assigned five reporters and three editors to review four years of Blair's work. The paper plans to publish a report as early as this Sunday, detailing the results of its investigation, and taking the extraordinary step of asking readers to report possible Blair errors or fabrications. Among the questionable stories Blair wrote:

MR. LYNCH: The doctors has a... ..

TERENCE SMITH: -- an interview with the father of P.F.C. Jessica Lynch, the former POW Mr. Lynch says Blair never spoke to him before a March 27 article that ran before her rescue.

Last fall's sniper rampage in the Washington area: Blair wrote 52 stories on the shooting spree for the paper. One piece, on December 22, outraged Fairfax County, Virginia, prosecutor Robert Horan.

ROBERT HORAN, Commonwealth's Attorney, Fairfax, VA: At least 60 percent is not accurate. I am not going to get in the business of telling you pre-trial what the facts are, but I am going to tell you that whoever put that stuff out, is putting out information that simply is not true, and I want the media to know that, particularly the media that follows like lemons behind The New York Times, and says whatever The New York Times said as if it were the gospel. They've been wrong before, and they are wrong on this one.

TERENCE SMITH: Indeed, Blair was often wrong. The paper published dozens of corrections of his work during his tenure at the Times.

For the record, New York Times correspondents frequently appear on the NewsHour to share their reports from the field. Jayson Blair has not been among them.

### **Tracking Blair's questionable work history**

Joining me now to discuss the Blair case is Howell Raines, executive editor of The New York Times. Howell Raines, what exactly did Jayson Blair do? I know you've conducted an extensive review of this now. Did he plagiarize? Did he fabricate? Was it both? Tell us what he did.

HOWELL RAINES, Executive Editor: I'm happy to deal with all those questions. First I want to say that here at the Times we regard the trust of our readers and our integrity as our most important asset. And the people in the room behind me have been working extremely hard this week in a mood of great seriousness to find out everything that we can about what this young person reported that was incorrect, to put it in front of our readers, the full array of information: What was wrong, what the correct facts should have been, and how it got into the paper.

And that's an enterprise, as you mentioned earlier in the program we hope to complete by Sunday. And it is a matter of the utmost importance to us.

TERENCE SMITH: And this is something you intend to share with your readers in.

HOWELL RAINES: Yeah. When Bob Rivard sent us a message last week that he thought Jayson Blair had copied Macarena Hernandez' story, we took it quite seriously, and Gerald Boyd, the managing editor, and Jim Roberts, the national editor immediately began an inquiry.

By Thursday, it had become clear to them that Jayson not only copied the story but that he might never have gone to Texas. At that point we asked to see Jayson's travel receipts. He resigned rather than come to a meeting where he was to produce them.

The very next morning we held a meeting where we made several decisions, all of them aimed at maximum openness and transparency with our readers. First, we assigned the team of the reporters that you described including some of our most skilled investigative and legal reporters working under the supervision of Al Siegel, our editor who is in charge of standards and corrections. We also told this team that we wanted them to have full access to all executives of the Times, including me, and to the information that we possessed.

And we also assured them that their findings would go in the paper in an independent way. My plan is to read this story for the first time on Sunday, if they're able to get it ready in time for Sunday, along with the rest of our readers.

That is because we believe that the antidote for bad journalism is to do good journalism about how the bad journalism got into your paper. And that's the work that we are about might never have gone to Texas.

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## Spotting the red flags in Blair's reporting

TERENCE SMITH: In trying to understand how this happened, was the editor of the San Antonio paper, the first to alert the Times that there may be a problem with Jayson Blair's reporting?

HOWELL RAINES: The first to my only. But one of the... the first journalist to my knowledge. One of the things that we have asked this reporting group to do is to work through the record. They tell me, in the course of interviewing me today, two of our reporters told me that they had already found 36 instances of fabrication. As I say, we're committed to fully disclosing every circumstance of this.

I do want to make the point to your readers who are not part of the journalism community, that the processes of editing at a paper like the Times and the other large papers in this country, is a multilayered process, and it's designed to handle, to find the unintentional or accidental errors in the copy of people who are working in an atmosphere of mutual trust and integrity and holding a shared faith in the strict set of journalistic values that we observe here.

This system is not set up to catch someone who sets out to lie and to use every means at his or her disposal to put false information into the paper.

TERENCE SMITH: Right. I understand the distinction. What I'm curious about, since he had a great number of corrections published in the paper over his tenure, and since publicly the prosecutor Bob Horan and others raised questions about his reporting, was there not a red flag to you earlier than last week?

HOWELL RAINES: The corrections were a red flag. I don't want to get into a debate with Mr. Horan whose account there has some parts of it that might be responded to.

But my main focus here is communicating with our readers about our effort to set the record straight. We monitor corrections closely. As Jack Schaeffer and other media commentators have pointed out, on a serious newspaper, you will have a higher number of corrections because those papers are aggressive about finding out mistakes, tracking them down.

In the case of this young man, he was working under the direct supervision as an intern of two of our most rigorous training editors. He had, over the space of three years, a record -- a correction rate of five percent. That, for my point of view, the acceptable correction rate is zero.

But five percent on a paper like this is not an automatic sign of incompetence. Indeed, we have a number of reporters who run in that range over time who are, without doubt seasoned professionals. Because we are aggressive about correcting our errors, it does not mean that we are reckless about letting them get into the paper. I've been back over... excuse me. I have been back over this young man's personnel records for the entire time he was here. After coming on to the staff in 2001, he went through a period where his error rate shot up to 16 percent in an eight-month period. During that time....

TERENCE SMITH: You might explain how that rate works. That's 16 errors in 100 stories?

HOWELL RAINES: I should have said corrections, Terry. In other words, for every 100 stories, 16 of them had to have something corrected run in the paper.

Sometimes this may be an error or a correction that's not due to the reporter's fault; that is to say, the police released the incorrect spelling of the name. We come back and correct it. It shows up in that reporter's computer tally.

## **How the Times is dealing with the situation**

TERENCE SMITH: Well, the question I'm sure people are wondering is in this report that you plan to get into the paper Sunday, if it's ready, I have read that you are going to ask readers to advise the Times and alert the Times if they know of other inconsistencies.

Does that suggest that this problem may be broader than even you have been able to discover?

HOWELL RAINES: I think this reporting team, which has been working virtually non-stop since last Friday, feels confident that they have found a large number, and that there are probably other fabrications out there. And the reason we've taken this step is that, one: We want to reassure our readers of our intention to use whatever resources it takes to set the record straight; that is our number one priority; to tell our readers what was wrongly reported in our paper and how it got in there.

Now, given the fact that this is an individual who wrote over 600 stories over a five-year period, we want to take the extra step of setting up a website where people who have had contact with him or who have knowledge about matters on which he was writing can contact us and we will then take that information and work on it.

## **Lessons for the future**

TERENCE SMITH: Stepping back from this particular case a little bit, Howell, what do you draw from it as an editor? What do you conclude? And does it lead you to anything that you could do differently in the future?

HOWELL RAINES: I haven't had a lot of time to step back, Terry, because I've been working in the manner I described. I mean one of the things that I want to look at is our processes for determining communication among editors, to look again at not only our error correction procedure, which we think is quite rigorous, but also what

follows after an error is corrected in the paper. I have to say, having said all that, that we have 375 reporters and over 700 editors and support personnel.

Every one of them every day operates under the same set of pressures and under a rigid set of journalistic standards that this young person tragically decided to not only defy, but to by everything we know now, use every means of deception at his disposal to get errors into the paper. I think we're dealing... we're dealing with an institution that is dedicated to openness. And starting Monday, after this story is published, I'll be meeting with each member of reporting and editing team to hear their recommendations. We will be communicating with our staff, and we will set up a process for looking searchingly at all of our procedures.

But I do want to stress that this is a case of what I would regard as tragic and pathological behavior in a situation where 1,130 other employees of the Times walk through the door at 33rd Street or other bureaus every day and tell the truth.

TERENCE SMITH: You have in the past describe Jayson Blair publicly as exactly the kind of young minority reporter that the newspaper needs to develop, needs to bring along. In hindsight, was he brought along too far, too fast?

HOWELL RAINES: Jack Schaeffer, the media columnist for Slate, made an interesting observation that I read today. It was that in the journalistic culture, there's a tendency, when someone cheats as spectacularly as this young person apparently did, to blame the institutions.

This is an institution that is always ready to examine itself and take whatever criticism and whatever corrective action is merited.

But I have to say again, when I look at this, what I see is a person who purposely decided to break the rules that over 1,100 of his colleagues followed quite comfortably every day and came to work for the five years he worked here on the assumption that he was a person with a sense of duty and personal honor who would be working in an atmosphere and a way that warranted their trust. And they didn't get it.

TERENCE SMITH: All right. Howell Raines, I appreciate this. This is not a happy story for you. Thank you for discussing it with us.

HOWELL RAINES: Thanks, Terry.