



## SHOCK WAVES

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*The controversy over former New York Times reporter Jayson Blair's plagiarized and fabricated stories has caused upheaval within the paper and has reverberated in newsrooms across the country.*  
*[Editor's Note: This discussion aired before Pulitzer Prize-winning national correspondent Rick Bragg officially resigned from The New York Times Wednesday night over a dispute concerning his crediting methods.]*

TERENCE SMITH: The troubles at the New York Times continue, most recently with the two-week suspension of Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent Rick Bragg.

Bragg, who has told interviewers that he intends to resign soon, was penalized for using an intern's reporting without giving credit.

The turmoil at The Times, sparked by the repeated plagiarism and fabrications of 27-year-old Jayson Blair, has caused upheaval within the paper and has had a ripple effect in newsrooms across the country.

The Times' problems are also affecting public perception of the truthfulness of the media. According to a USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll published today, 62 percent of people surveyed said the media is "often inaccurate -- nearly an all-time high.

Joining me now to discuss the Blair affair, its effects on The Times, and the repercussions in American media are: Greg Mitchell, editor of Editor and Publisher magazine, an industry publication; Julia Wallace, editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution; John Temple, editor and publisher of The Rocky Mountain News; and Marvin Kalb, senior fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Welcome to you all.

### **The controversy over Bragg's suspension**

Greg Mitchell, can you explain what Rick Bragg's suspension is all about, and what it tells you about how reporting is conducted at big papers, like The New York Times?

GREG MITCHELL: I think a lot of people were surprised at some of the details of the story. Rick Bragg is based in New Orleans for The New York Times, was working on a story in Florida and he apparently had had what they're calling an assistant or an intern who was paid by him, not by the newspaper, who has routinely for quite some time done the major bulk of reporting in some of his stories, and they had a story based at the Apalachicola Bay about the oyster fishermen, and the intern actually did every interview for the story. And Rick Bragg went out to Florida for one day, and then wrote the story.

When the story ran, it did not mention at all the reporting was done by the intern, it did not credit the intern in any way. They carried the dateline of Apalachicola and as far as the world knew, Rick Bragg had done all the reporting himself, all the writing himself.

I think one of the most shocking revelations in the story was that Bragg said this was routine for him, he claimed it's routine for many people at The New York Times, and it's routine in the industry. The other shocking thing was that the reporter that... the intern that he used was in his early 20s, and other interns who have been used were 20, 21.

So people were very surprised that particularly a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter like Rick Bragg would rely on a very untested, very young intern to collect all the information for a major story.

TERENCE SMITH: Julia Wallace, is that sort of reporting and relationship routine at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution?

JULIA WALLACE: No. Our reporters wondered how they can get an intern like this.

At our paper, our reporters do the reporting. I think a lot of this is unique to The Times. They for years have had an extensive stringer system in which people file, and the correspondents tried to get to the scene as quickly as they, can, but I think this is really a unique Times issue.

TERENCE SMITH: What does it say to you?

JULIA WALLACE: Well, I can't speak for The Times. Many years ago, too many to admit, I was a stringer for The Times, and my understanding of the policy then was it was a privilege to get a byline, and that those would only be granted on rare occasions, and it really spoke to the aura of The Times more than anything else.

Obviously the question is, what do readers expect and what do the people who read the story and say, "hey, the guy with the byline is some guy I never met," and it raises questions about readers and credibility.

TERENCE SMITH: Right, but Julia Wallace, I take it you did not function that way as a stringer?

JULIA WALLACE: I did. I would send files in and not get a byline.

TERENCE SMITH: But you would write the stories yourself?

JULIA WALLACE: No, they would be written by The Times' person.

TERENCE SMITH: Okay, just trying to get it clear.

John Temple, I wonder what questions this raises for you, this disclosure and this procedure, as someone who edits a paper that uses The New York Times news service.

JOHN TEMPLE: Well, this one is a lot... is a lot more difficult to grapple with for me than the Jayson Blair case. The issue here is that it appears that he's not doing any of his own reporting.

I understand why a bureau reporter would need assistants to help gather information. It's a daunting task to be assigned to cover a region of the country and to provide work on the level that The New York Times correspondents do, and they do an incredible job for the most part. And so I don't think this raises the issues for us as much as the Jayson Blair and the whole issue of anonymous sources that emerged in the Jayson Blair case.

## **The impact on The New York Times' credibility**

TERENCE SMITH: Marvin Kalb, what's your reaction to the way The Times handled this situation, both the Rick Bragg situation and the larger Jayson Blair situation and the ramifications of it?

MARVIN KALB: I have the feeling that The New York Times right now is like part of a government caught with its hand in the cookie jar. The New York Times in a sense has done something wrong, it is very large, it is very important to the nation, to the world, as a matter of fact.

And it is trying to come back, and the way it's coming back, it seems to me, doesn't measure up to what The Times ought to be; there are no firings, nobody resigns. It's like the government in that sense.

Right now if you want information from The Times you have to go to a spokesperson to get it. There is distance, and I don't think The Times ought to be handing it in this way. Right now, what I hear from talking to a lot of Times reporters is that the newsroom itself has a "poisonous atmosphere," that's in quotes...

TERENCE SMITH: That was a quote from Rick Bragg, in fact?

MARVIN KALB: It's a quote from Rick Bragg, and it's been picked up and used by a lot of other reporters.

And what they are saying to themselves is that we work for a terrific newspaper, but somehow we're not acting like a terrific newspaper, and there's a great deal of disappointment. There's a feeling that something larger has to happen and it's not happening.

## **The effect on newsrooms across the country**

TERENCE SMITH: Greg Mitchell, what are the ripples of this, ripple effect through the industry, as you survey it around the country?

GREG MITCHELL: Well, they've been quite profound. Actually, I think when it first broke, there was a feeling that this was a New York thing, or a New York Times thing, and instead newsrooms around the country have been reexamining their own policies. The two phrases I've heard more than any is... or are: "It can happen here"; and "trust, but verify."

And I think that's what newsrooms are trying to do, and they're holding meetings, they're sending memos, they're considering hiring ombudsmen. They are changing policies on sources or dusting off old policies.

I think the problem with sourcing is that very often there have been rules in place that have been ignored because most newspapers have not had major scandals.

And I mean, I think that's the wonderful thing about newspapers, if you look at the entire industry, is that most of them have not had these sorts of problems. They have routine corrections, they often make small mistakes; they all have their own things they have to look into. But most of them have stayed clear of this level of scandal, and I think that's to their credit.

And I think that they are wise on the other hand to be dusting off the rules and looking at the many, many things they could do better.

TERENCE SMITH: Julia Wallace, are you dusting off some rules and looking at things?

JULIA WALLACE: Yes, actually this evening, we just had a staff meeting with about 100 people, and talked about some policies we're clarifying, and really opened it up to the staff: What questions does this raise for you, what are issues that we need to address?

And it was a great conversation, talking about issues like anonymous sources, talking about how do you handle a big breaking story when feeds are coming in from all sorts of sources. And so I think the industry in a bizarre way will end up in a better place because of these conversations.

TERENCE SMITH: John Temple, when it comes to anonymous sources, you've introduced some changes at your newspaper on that. Tell us about that.

JOHN TEMPLE: Yes, I have. I was concerned after the appearance of the four-page spread in The Times explaining the Jayson Blair case, and I called The Times -- as The Rocky Mountain News subscribes to The New York Times news service, and has the right to print any of the material in The New York Times -- and I wanted a clarification on The Times' policy on anonymous sources. And ultimately the policy as it was conveyed to me was there is no formal policy. And I found that to be of tremendous concern, because I had done the same thing with the Associated Press that day.

And so effective that day, on Monday, we introduced a policy that any New York Times story using anonymous sources must be approved by the managing editor or the editor, and that is the same policy we have for our own stories. So in other words, we're putting The Times' stories through our own filter, the exact same filter, and asking ourselves whether we should run this story, and in fact we have rejected already one page-one story that The Times offered and did run on their page one.

TERENCE SMITH: So as a subscriber to that service, John Temple, I gather, you're taking a more skeptical or questioning look at The New York Times product that is coming in to your office?

JOHN TEMPLE: That's correct, because I asked The Times news service -- I said it would be my request that you acknowledge in the copy that you have verified the sources and that the editors at the paper know who the sources are and have decided, thus have decided it's worth publishing.

But that's not The Times' approach, and my worry is that if The Times isn't going to do that, then I have evaluate it on a case by case basis. And when you get an entire story based on anonymous sources that's inflammatory, for example, a story saying that U.S. officials are saying they're going to shoot looters on sight, where they have quotes that there's no attribution in the entire story, I felt uncomfortable with that story and I did not feel it was necessary to run it without knowing more, and I waited and did not run that story.

TERENCE SMITH: And that story was later clarified?

JOHN TEMPLE: That story, well, I don't really know what it was. The Associated Press moved a story the following day, essentially refuting the story where... quoting officials by name saying that story was not correct. At least that's my understanding. I think we would have known it was correct if people had been shot. I mean, you would think that if we have a new policy that we're going to shoot looters to send a message, we would have seen that, and we have not.

## Restoring public confidence in the media

TERENCE SMITH: Martin Kalb, when you listen to this, do newspapers or news organizations, not just newspapers, need to change the way they do business in order to restore their credibility?

MARVIN KALB: Of course they do. But I'm astounded by what John just said.

Let's face it, The New York Times is the journalistic standard, not just for newspapers, but for all news organizations. And for a serious editor to say, "I don't fully trust The New York Times now to give me the truth," that is sadly a reflection of what many Americans are saying: That they don't believe that they're getting the truth from journalists anymore.

If polls say to an average American right now, what is your reaction to the Jayson Blair thing, they say, "Who's Jayson Blair?" They're not even interested and when you press them, they come back at you and say, "Look, that's what journalists have been doing all the time."

The idea that in the average American mind there is the feeling that the average American reporter is not telling them the truth is an extraordinary fact that must be dealt with.

All of journalism has to address this issue now, and as seriously as possible.

TERENCE SMITH: I wonder, Greg Mitchell, whether when you look at those poll numbers that we cited at the beginning, what that tells you about public confidence, which the polls say is at a low point, and what has to be done to deal with it.

GREG MITCHELL: I think all the many steps that we've talked about here and are being talked about in newsrooms are all good ideas. But I think to an extent the newspapers are getting a bad rap, or a slightly unfair rap.

I think the public today increasingly sees things through an ideological lens, and when they watch a news program or they read a newspaper and they see something that they don't like or is challenging to them, they may feel that this news is untrue, that the newspaper is biased, that the newspaper is spreading lies, and so their opinion of the newspaper and the overall news industry becomes low.

I think in many cases it's the case of the messenger bearing bad news. And that's often true with newspapers.

What I'm afraid is that the public is increasingly looking for news that reflects their views, and they're going to find it on certain TV channels, they're going to find it in certain newspapers and magazines.

So rather than opening themselves to the real truth and the complexity of news and varying opinions, they're going to turn to those sources and they're going to feel that the news from newspapers is somehow untrue or biased.

TERENCE SMITH: Julia Wallace, how do you think the public is responding to all this? Do they, are they very skeptical?

JULIA WALLACE: I think the public is not focused on this because they're not surprised. And that's really our issue. We've got to figure out ways to speak to them more, listen to them more, and pay attention.

One thing we've done is we created a public editor, and every day his photo runs on the second page, page two, we encourage people to call. And he communicates with the staff, with the readers, and it's one step in helping open those communication lines.

TERENCE SMITH: John Temple, you were suggesting earlier that the communication lines certainly of The New York Times are not all that open -- even for someone such as yourself, a paying customer, so to speak -- of the news service.

JOHN TEMPLE: Well, I disagree with the others that I think the public is paying attention to this, and I think it's of great concern to them, and I think Mr. Kalb is right in the sense that The Times' response to the incident in terms of -- 'it's just a bad guy doing bad things and don't demonize us as editors,' -- has hurt journalists because we need to accept responsibility. If we didn't learn from the Tylenol case and other cases that the best thing we can do when there's a problem is accept responsibility, and be out front on it, that's a real mistake on our part. And I think we need to learn that lesson, and The Times went part way, and don't get me wrong, I admire the paper.

TERENCE SMITH: All right. We have to go I'm afraid. Editors all, Marvin Kalb, thank you very much