

by the market culture. A sense of powerlessness probably helps account for the fervor with which they drive a Cooke, Glass or Blair out of the newsroom—they have a culprit by the collar at last.

The Jaysons of journalism thus present a paradox. On the one hand, they deserve to be called to account. On the other, they can be considered scapegoats—stand-ins for the unpunishable, reminders of an old refrain that Mark Feldstein brought up at the forum. One version goes like this:

Stealing the goose from the Commons
Risks irons, the hood and the noose,
But law will not touch the Brahmins
Who steal the Green from the goose.

Notes

- ¹ This essay was inspired in part by conversations with Dr. Mark Feldstein of George Washington University and my wife, Rachel Gorlin. I want to thank them for their insights, while stressing that any misjudgments and factual errors in the article are strictly my own.
- ² The University of Maryland and its College of Journalism tapped success-story Blair for recruiting ads and fund-raisers, even though he had failed to graduate.
- ³ Interestingly, though, NBC reporter Maria Shriver was pressured to quit when her husband, muscle-man actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, became Governor of California in 2003. The logic of the networks seems to be as follows: The celebrity journalist draws ratings. So she can keep working after marrying a newsmaker—unless the newsmaker begins seriously to outshine her. In such a case, she is locked in a “conflict of interest” and must go. The network is not really concerned about the ethical problem, though. It just does not want to shine less brightly because some *uber*-celebrity has eclipsed one of its own.

Reference

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Organizational Failures in the Jayson Blair Incident

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The disastrous episode of Jayson Blair's faked news reports and plagiarism at *The New York Times* has led to widespread discussion and soul-searching in the journalistic community

and society. Many observers have discussed how Blair duped and deceived his bosses and portrayed *The New York Times* as an unwitting victim; others have cast the incident as an ethics issue; and some cast it as an affirmative action and diversity issue. Those issues are clearly involved but the central problem behind the scandal is a set of systemic management failures that made the episode possible and compounded its effects.

The finger of blame does not point to any single individuals but to a collective failure of many individuals, the *Times* as an organization, and its managerial processes. The story is fraught with examples of failures of personnel management, organizational culture and coordination, and crisis management, compounded by problems of leadership.

At the heart of the *Times'* failures in the Blair episode were gross shortcomings in personnel management practices and processes involved in the selection, hiring, development, supervision, and discipline of Jayson Blair. Had these failures not occurred, the Blair episode would not blight on the *Times'* and journalism's reputations today.

Basic personnel procedures involve standardized and similar procedures for personnel searches and selections that are expected to be followed to avoid difficulties. Journalistic organizations, especially large ones such as *The New York Times*, have procedures and processes established by human resources departments to ensure adherence to legal mandates and to recruit the best possible personnel. These processes involve announcement of positions, reviews of applications, and checking references, former employers, and educational institutions.

The process of Blair's hiring is not clear from public discussions of the incident. Whatever occurred, he was an extremely young journalist who did not meet the paper's normal experience requirements. His selection may have been for diversity purposes, but it is unclear why he was chosen when hundreds of more qualified minority journalists would have been delighted for the chance to work at the elite newspaper.

What is clear is that Blair was hired without adequate background checks by the newsroom

or human resources personnel. The personnel functions appear to have been primarily mechanical paper filing. No real check was done of his resume, which indicated he had graduated from the University of Maryland. Simple phone calls to the university registrar and discussions with journalism faculty would have found that Blair had not received his degree and revealed the earlier problems that he had as a journalism student and editor.

The deficiencies in the initial selection process created a situation in which development of Jayson Blair's abilities and character were critical. As a neophyte journalist in one of the world's most important journalist organizations—especially if he were hired for diversity purposes—Jayson Blair needed to grow significantly as a journalist and *Times* employee. There is no evidence, however, that he was given that attention, training, and support, or that he had a mentor to which he could turn who was concerned about his development.

These processes and resources, which exist in many media companies, were strangely unapparent in Blair's short career. Managing Editor Gerald Boyd, who was later accused of helping Blair and giving special treatment, specifically denied that he was Blair's mentor.

The organizational omission of helping Blair become a journalist—much less a journalist at a leading news organization—left him on his own to develop the sense of the paper's mission, its culture, and practices, and to wrestle with professional problems on his own. At the most, the organization showed indifference to his presence and to the development potential Blair had that would allow him to contribute to the organization and its readers' understanding of the world about them.

The third, and perhaps greatest personnel management failure surrounding the incident, involves supervisory practices and the failure reveals serious gaps in the abilities of editors at the *Times* to manage effectively. Supervision involves monitoring and controlling personnel and is necessary when one assigns work tasks and responsibility. A good supervisor manages the work of his or her employees and makes regular evaluations of the work being done as a means of helping subordinates improve their

performance and contributions to the organization. Good supervision helps the employee grow as a person and professional and results from regular and committed interactions between reporters (especially young journalists) and their editors.

Supervision of Jayson Blair appears to have been a problem throughout his career and he learned the techniques of manipulating and defrauding the organization because of lapses in that oversight. During the course of his employment, when errors and misdeeds were discovered, they often went unpunished by the *Times*.

During his five-year career at the *Times*, about one in 15 stories required corrections BEFORE those involved in the scandal that resulted in his downfall. Accounting reviews showed he had a history of overspending on and falsifying expense accounts. Yet they did not result in stronger oversight, career counseling, or evident punishment.

As early as 2002, metro editor Jonathan Landman wrote a strongly written memo about Blair's performance because of the mounting problem, saying "We have to stop Jayson from writing for the *Times*. Right now." That memo to the associate managing editor for administration and the assistant to the Managing Editor Gerald Boyd resulted only in a memo to Blair's personnel file indicating he was in danger of losing his job.

Despite knowledge of Blair's problems, no effort was made to help him improve his performance. In fact, Blair was promoted OUT of his position and given better reporting positions. This clearly kept him from learning lessons from his performance and reveals a narrowness of vision of supervisors who were merely trying to make the problem go away rather than looking out for the organization as a whole.

At one point, Blair took part in a company-sponsored program for personnel with personal problems. Although the nature of that incident was and should remain private, it should have been a warning signal to supervisors. During and after his time in the personnel assistance program, newsroom supervisors should have seen the need to give him greater oversight, to

ensure he did not harm the organization, and to assist him in overcoming his difficulties and in feeling part of the organizational family. They apparently did not.

So Blair continued to have a relatively disconnected life at the paper, reportedly exhibited erratic behavior, and continued to make journalistic mistakes. Finally, at 27 years of age, Jayson Blair was discovered to have had problems with dozens of stories in his coverage of the Washington DC-area sniper case and the war on Iraq involving falsified quotes, concocted interviews, and lies about his whereabouts.

Complaints about inaccuracies in the reporting from officials were originally unheeded. Perhaps it was an arrogant dismissal of complaints of outsiders (although the newspaper's Washington bureau even complained), perhaps it was a *Times* culture of professionalism to give journalists independence, or perhaps it was because management was paying attention to things other than content complaints and staff problems. Whatever the reason, management did not deal with the Blair problem until it became a huge public embarrassment and sparked the ritualistic orgy of self-examination, breast beating, and wailing in the paper and the journalism community.

Most worrying in the *Times'* response has been the notion that Blair was an aberration and the company had no reason to be wary of his actions and falsehoods. Plagiarism and false stories, however, are hardly new to journalism, and journalistic fraud and misrepresentation are regularly exposed. They are constant problems in the newspaper industry that lead to dismissals and discipline of reporters in journalistic organizations every year.

Admittedly, these kinds of cases only rarely rise to level of that involving Blair, but previous problems should have made the *Times'* managers cognizant of the potential and lead them to investigate allegations earlier. After *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke was accused and acknowledged fabricating her Pulitzer Prize-winning story, the paper responded by instituting hiring, training and supervisory programs to help avoid future problems. Apparently, these protections were

not in place at the *Times*, were ignored, or managers just failed to carry out those portions of their jobs.

Discussions of the incident and managerial failures at the *Times* have made it clear that the editorial structure of the paper is strongly hierarchical, has significant bureaucratic tendencies, and lacks effective communication mechanisms.

The editorial staff complain that they are isolated from the editorial management, that managers are indifferent or arrogant, and that managers exhibit significant favoritism in treatment of staff. Relationships between managers and subordinates are said to be poor and morale is low. A clear asymmetrical power relationship is described instead of a symmetrical relationship among colleagues.

Regardless of the degree of truth to those complaints, there is a clear perception among many journalists at the *Times* that these factors are harmful and contributed significantly to the Blair incident. After the Blair frauds were exposed, those perceptions were voiced in a tumultuous meeting between Executive Editor Howell Raines and the staff. In reports about the meeting, Raines was quoted as saying "You view me as inaccessible and arrogant" and that he regretted a climate of "fear" that kept other journalists from talking with editors about Blair before the public humiliation of the paper.

"You believe the newsroom is too hierarchical, that my ideas get acted on and others get ignored," Raines told the assembled journalists. "I heard that you were convinced there's a star system that singles out my favorites for elevation."

It was not the first indications of an organizational divide and evidence has been accumulating for many years. Three decades ago, Abe Rosenthal was known for cursing, threatening, and humiliating journalists in front of their peers. Although that situation has been evident for some years, a divide in which the great editors are highly separated from the working journalists clearly remains and will continue to hamper organizational communication and relations in the *Times* unless significant attention is given to the organizational culture.

Crisis Management Failures

When the problems with Jayson Blair became too evident to ignore, the *Times'* management initially failed to respond clearly, candidly, and contritely, lessons it should have learned over the years as it watched major companies in other industries respond to its own revelations of misdeeds, corporate irresponsibility or dangerous products.

Indeed there were deliberate efforts by Publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. to protect the paper's top managers when the stories broke. Soul searching about the paper's self-interests in credibility emerged, but organizational responsibility was generally ignored and statements of disbelief, of placing blame elsewhere, and of trying to avoid responsibility appeared. After two months—when it was clear that the company response failed to assuage the journalistic community and the paper's own staff—Managing Editor Gerald Boyd and Executive Editor Howell Raines ceremonially fell on their pens and resigned.

Its soul-searching article in November, *The New York Times* called the incident "a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper," and Arthur Sulzberger Jr. called it a "huge black eye." Despite that verdict and the calming of some of the public debate, there is still no sign of organic change in the culture or management of the paper, except the appointment of new editors and a reader's representative whose ability to solve the managerial failures is suspect.

Unless stronger attention is given to the company culture, work structures, and managerial processes, the changes implemented are little more than small bandages put on an open wound at the paper.

Commentary

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Jayson Blair is not a member of an exclusive club. Never was. Never will be. He is not even a world-class liar, despite the barrels of ink spilled over his journalistic felonies. We know

him chiefly—and most likely temporarily—because he got caught telling little lies in a big way.

It is true that even little lies add up to a big problem for the press, especially when they appear in America's newspaper of record, *The New York Times*. It is also true that Jayson Blair damaged the *Times* grievously between the fall of 2002 and the spring of 2003 as he made up material, stole the work of others, and failed to be where he and his dateline said he was. His departure left the newsroom in turmoil, the careers of two top editors in ruins, and the entire American press on edge.

If that were not enough, there quickly tumbled out in the wake of the Blair scandal a series of distressingly similar journalistic villainy. Just a sampling from March of this year alone:

After examining 10 years of reporting by one of its best-known journalists, *USA Today* reported that the inquiry had turned up "substantial" evidence that foreign correspondent Jack Kelley had fabricated significant portions of eight major articles and lifted 24 quotes and other material from other publications. His editors also said that he had persuaded others to help him deceive the newspaper's investigators.

The Chicago Tribune launched a review of three years' worth of reporting by Uli Schmetzer, a former foreign correspondent who had continued to work for the paper on a freelance basis after he retired two years before. Editors said that Schmetzer had admitted making up the name and occupation of a source used in a February 24 story, datelined from Australia.

And to prove the forgiving—or forgetful—character of the news profession, *The Boston Herald* announced its hiring of Mike Barnicle, whose 25-year-career at the rival *Globe* ended ingloriously in 1998 after questions arose about sources quoted and material appearing in his columns.

And so it goes.

Jacques Steinberg wrote in the *Times* on March 22, "At least 10 papers, as large as *The Chicago Tribune* and as small as *The Sedalia Democrat* in Missouri, have confirmed instances of plagiarism or fabrication since the *Times* re-