



Setting the Agenda: The New York Times' Jayson Blair Report and its Impact on American Media

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Setting the Agenda:

The New York Times' Jayson Blair Report and its Impact
on American Media

By Seth Mnookin
Shorenstein Fellow, Spring 2004

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On Saturday April 26, 2003 Robert Rivard, the editor of *The San Antonio Express-News*, woke up and drove two hours out to his weekend cabin in the Texas hill country along the Llano River. He was planning on spending a weekend off the grid, catching up on his reading and relaxing. Rivard brought along a pile of newspapers with him that weekend, including Friday's *Wall Street Journal* and Saturday's *New York Times*. Rivard started with the *Times*. "I got out there and I put my feet up, and immediately, this front-page story caught my eye," Rivard says. The story was about Juanita Anguiano, a Texas woman whose enlisted son was the only American soldier still missing in action in Iraq almost a week after retired U.S. general Jay Garner had set up office in Baghdad as the country's new civil administrator. It was written by a reporter named Jayson Blair, and it got huge play—three columns spread across the most valuable real estate in journalism. The headline read, "Family Waits, Now Alone, for a Missing Soldier."

Rivard chuckled to himself when he saw the dateline. Los Fresnos is a tiny farming community—its population is under 5,000—nestled in the southeastern tip of Texas along the Mexican border. "I was pretty sure that was the last time I'd see Los Fresnos on the front page of the *Times*," Rivard says. The *Express-News* had recently written a similar story about the Anguianos—the month-long conflict had ended the week before, and newspapers around the country were searching for ways to keep readers interested in the situation in Iraq. Even before he started reading, Rivard assumed the *Times* had seen his paper's story and decided to follow-up with a dispatch of its own. That kind of regional poaching is a common (and more or less accepted) practice among national correspondents at the country's largest dailies; indeed, one of the implicit responsibilities

of the *Times*' regional reporters is to read the local papers and see if any of them uncovered any good stories that deserved a broader audience.

For the editors of many of the country's mid-size dailies, reaction to this kind of story appropriation ranges from pride to frustration and outright anger. It's nice to see your work validated in the most powerful paper in the world, but not quite as nice when there's no attendant acknowledgment. Rivard had worked as a former senior editor at *Newsweek* in the 1980s, and knew the New York City journalism crowd. What's more, he was, perhaps, oversensitive to hints of pilfering by the *Times*. Four years earlier, in the spring of 1999, Rivard had accused a *Times* reporter of lifting one of his reporter's stories about a suspect in the disappearance of atheist leader Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Rivard had complained to then-managing editor Bill Keller, who wrote back a snippy and belittling note. Rivard let the matter drop, but he never forgot about it.

The *Express-News* story on the Anguianos, written by a young *Express-News* reporter—and former *Times* intern—named Macarena Hernandez, had run on April 18, eight days earlier. Rivard's cabin has no Internet hookup and no phone, so he couldn't look through his paper's electronic archives online or call an editor at his paper's offices to compare the two stories. On Monday, he thought, when he was back in the office, he'd check this out.

Macarena Hernandez had also seen Blair's story, and she recognized her piece immediately. She was furious. Hernandez had known Blair: the two were part of the same

minority internship program at the *Times* in 1999. “Jayson was always just a big kiss-ass,” Hernandez says. “He wasn’t even very smooth about it. I thought he was always more interested in being at *The New York Times* than he was in being a journalist. But he seemed harmless. A little misguided and immature, but harmless.”

Now, four years after Hernandez had turned down a chance to stay at the *Times* so she could return home to San Antonio, it appeared as if Blair had ripped her off. “It was just completely obvious that he had taken major chunks of it,” Hernandez says. The second paragraph of Hernandez’s story read:

So the single mother, a teacher's aide, points to the ceiling fan [Edward] installed in her small living room. She points to the pinstriped couches, the tennis bracelet still in its red velvet case and the Martha Stewart patio furniture, all gifts from her first born and only son.

Blair’s story began:

Juanita Anguiano points proudly to the pinstriped couches, the tennis bracelet in its red case and the Martha Stewart furniture out on the patio. She proudly points up to the ceiling fan, the lamp for Mother's Day, the entertainment center that arrived last Christmas and all the other gifts from her only son, Edward, a 24-year-old Army mechanic.

The rest of the piece was riddled with identical quotes and turns of phrase. In both stories, Juanita Anguiano says, “I wish I could talk to a mother who is in the same shoes as I.” In both stories, the author writes how Anguiano’s sleep only comes “with a pill.” “I was blown away,” says Hernandez flatly. What’s more, the Anguiano’s Martha Stewart patio furniture wasn’t on a patio, as Blair had written—it was still in its boxes in the middle of the living room.

On Monday morning, Hernandez placed a courtesy call to Sheila Rule, the *Times* recruiter who had hired both Hernandez and Blair, to let her know about the situation. Rivard decided to wait and see what the *Times*' reaction to Hernandez's call would be. "Since someone at the *Times* already knew about this, I didn't want for us all to gang up on it. I decided to give them a news cycle to acknowledge and correct this," Rivard says.

In New York, Sheila Rule told *Times* managing editor Gerald Boyd about Macarena Hernandez's complaint. Boyd immediately summoned national editor Jim Roberts. Blair's Los Fresnos story had run in Roberts' section, and Jayson Blair—a seemingly indefatigable 27-year-old reporter—had been working for Roberts for the previous six months, ever since he had been drafted as an extra set of legs in the Washington, D.C., sniper story, in October, 2002. Boyd, Roberts, Rule and Bill Schmidt, an associate managing editor in charge of newsroom administration, met in the managing editor's office. It was a dispiriting meeting. "By the time I got there, they had already concluded this looked really bad," says Roberts. "It was pretty obvious this was at least plagiarism."

Four days later, on Friday, May 2, *The New York Times* ran its first story on the Jayson Blair situation. The piece, which was written by Jacques Steinberg, the *Times*' newspaper beat reporter, said that Blair had resigned from the paper. By that point, it had become clear that Blair had not only plagiarized from the *Express-News*, he likely hadn't traveled to Texas at all, and may have fabricated parts of dozens of more stories. Blair, who

refused to speak to Steinberg, gave a brief statement to the Associated Press in which he said, “I have been struggling with recurring personal issues.”

Immediately, New York’s overactive media watchers became preoccupied by news and gossip about Blair’s misdeeds. On May 2, *Times* executive editor Howell Raines told *The Daily News* that Blair had “trouble with basics of the craft,” leading many people to wonder why, if that was so, Blair had been sent to cover some of the past year’s highest-profile and most important national news stories. Raines also acknowledged that he had assigned a team of staffers to check the rest of Blair’s stories for mistakes. “We have good reason to believe we’ve published flawed journalism,” Raines said.

Still, even with all the attention the story got that weekend, the Blair scandal looked as if it would remain more or less contained within the city’s hyper-oxygenated media circles. That week, *The New York Post* ran some small items on Blair, either consigned to the paper’s gossip pages or peppered with snarky anonymous quotes. Mickey Kaus, a blogger who wrote most frequently about politics, welfare, race, and the media, posted an item connecting Blair’s flameout to affirmative action programs. The *Washington City Paper*, which had heavily covered a contretemps over Blair’s sniper reporting back in the fall of 2002, put together a cover story on the many errors in Blair’s coverage. *Slate*’s Jack Shafer, who himself had been snookered by a writer who convinced him to run a largely made-up account of something called “monkeyfishing,” wrote about how any editor can be fooled by a reporter determined to perpetrate a fraud. And *The Daily News*’s Paul Colford filled in his readers on whatever it was the *Times* said it was doing next.

Over the coming week, *The New York Times* would demonstrate once again its power to shape the national news agenda, and in doing so, would help codify the way in which newspapers were expected to respond to accusations of serious fraud among their own staffs. A team of five reporters, three editors, and a handful of researchers were digging into Jayson Blair's career with an intensity and scrutiny usually reserved for corrupt public officials. Their report would transform the Jayson Blair story into a national scandal, one that would likely affect the culture of the paper, and, very possibly, other newspapers, for years to come.

On the morning of Friday, May 2, 2003, Gerald Boyd's secretary summoned Adam Liptak to the managing editor's office. Liptak, the *Times*' thin, balding, legal correspondent, had traveled an atypical path to the *Times*' newsroom. For years, he had served as the paper's in-house legal counsel, working closely with the editorial side of the paper on libel and First Amendment issues. He'd always maintained an interest in writing—he'd done some book reviews for the paper, and had once written a Talk of the Town story for *The New Yorker*—but was still surprised when, in 2002, Howell Raines asked him if he was interested in serving as the paper's new chief legal writer. Liptak, whose five-year-old daughter Katie was in kindergarten at the Bank Street School on 112th Street, had a parent-teacher conference scheduled for lunchtime, and when he was summoned in to Boyd's office, he called his wife to tell her he might not be able to make

it. “I had no idea what this was about,” Liptak says, “but whatever it was, I assumed it was some issue that had to do with me.” Liptak arrived first, and he sat alone, waiting.

Boyd’s secretary also called Jonathan Glater. Glater, a light-skinned African-American reporter with wavy hair and braces, is excruciatingly polite. He was coming up on his three-year anniversary at the *Times*; he’d arrived during the paper’s (and the industry’s) last big round of hiring, back in the summer of 2000. Before that, Glater had been removed from the world of daily journalism for a half-decade, since he left *The Washington Post* in the mid 1990s. After the *Post*, Glater went to Yale Law School and then spent two years working as a lawyer, first in Buenos Aires and then at as a litigator in the New York office of Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton. The whole time he was practicing law, Glater says, he missed writing. In the summer of 2000, he decided to send out his clips. “The great thing about law is, sometimes you can make a difference—usually for one client at a time,” Glater says. “As a journalist, you can make a difference for a whole lot of people at once.” To his surprise, he was offered a job on the *Times*’ business staff covering law firms, accounting firms, and consulting firms. He knows his timing was fortuitous. “Six months later in 2000, [after the stock market bubble burst,] and no one was hiring at all, least of all one more wannabe law firm refugee with various journalism internships but no clips in years,” he says.

Glater thought he’d been summoned for a debriefing about his recent month-long reporting stint in Los Angeles, where he had replaced Jacques Steinberg, who had also been there on a temporary posting. It was Glater’s first real assignment for the paper’s

national staff, but he knew it might not be his last. Ever since September 11th, the *Times* had been in triage mode, as many of the paper's most enterprising reporters were recruited to cover the first terror strikes, then the war in Afghanistan, then the war in Iraq. Adding to the staffing problems, Howell Raines had forced out a handful of the paper's national correspondents in 2002, including Sam Howe Verhovek in Seattle, Kevin Sack in Atlanta, and Evelyn Nieves in Los Angeles. Glater, whose wife works in a Manhattan law firm, didn't have the flexibility to ask for a posting overseas, but earlier in the year he had gone to Boyd and said he would welcome the chance to spend a month or so filling in at one of the paper's domestic bureaus. The Los Angeles assignment had been his first posting outside of New York.

When Glater saw Liptak in Boyd's office, he concluded that Liptak had been tapped as the next person to fill in at the L.A. bureau. To pass the time until Boyd showed up, Glater started to recount details from one of his more amusing and memorable stories. "Adultery May Be A Sin, But It's a Crime No More," published on April 17, 2003, was a lighthearted piece about a gated community more than an hour's drive from L.A. that had recently removed from its books a statute outlawing adultery. (The piece quoted a retired banker who dated another woman during his divorce: "Arguably that would've run afoul of this," the banker said. "I try not to violate these provisions.") Glater told Liptak about how he drove all the way out to the community, called Rolling Hills, only to be turned back at the gate. As he was finishing his story, Boyd walked into the room.

“Well, at least you really went,” Boyd said. That was the first hint Glater got that this wasn’t going to be about Los Angeles. Jacques Steinberg and Lorne Manly arrived soon after. (Earlier that morning, Manly had been told he’d have the “acting” removed from his title and would be made the paper’s permanent media editor.) Boyd told the three reporters and one editor he wanted them to work on a team that would examine the career of Jayson Blair at *The New York Times*. “The notion that Jayson wasn’t in Los Fresno changes things substantially,” Boyd said. “We need to go back and look at everything, starting with the work he did for the national desk.” The team, Boyd said, should get started immediately. “The initial marching orders were not incredibly precise,” Glater says. “We thought we’d need to come up with 2,500 words by Monday or Tuesday.”

“Gerald started to lay out a working hypothesis of what he expected us to find out about Jayson,” Liptak says. “And that’s that Jayson had no credit, that he had reached his limit on the company credit card, and this was why he got boxed in to this position where he’d either need to turn down assignments or make stuff up.” The *Times*, like many media companies, requires its reporters to front their travel expenses and file receipts to be reimbursed. For a national reporter making last-minute reservations and flying around the country, this can result in outlays of thousands of dollars. Glater mentioned how he had been fronting substantial sums of money while he was in Los Angeles.

Boyd also made it clear that the team would need to report on their superiors, including himself and Howell Raines. “He told us that he was going to be deciding what sort of cooperation to extend us,” Liptak says. “He was saying, ‘There are some things I might

tell you, some things I might not. There are some records we might share, and some we might not.’ He was plainly setting up an independent unit in the paper to report on the paper.”

“We were going to report this as *Times* reporters,” Steinberg says. “It wasn’t even clear yet who was going to lead us, so we were told to just kind of sit tight and they were in the process of getting in touch with people who might head up the team. But it was clear we were heading into uncharted territory.”

After Glater, Liptak, and Steinberg left Gerald Boyd’s office, the managing editor spoke to Lorne Manly about how the project would evolve. Boyd told Manly he would be involved with the project—as an editor—but would still likely need to work on daily stories. “I wasn’t going to be the main editor,” Manly says. “But Gerald had no idea who would be. He talked vaguely about wanting someone who wasn’t involved in the newsroom but knew the culture. But at this point he was mainly just stressing that they wanted the record corrected.” Manly had only been in charge of the paper’s media coverage for two weeks, and he was still trying to feel his way around the *Times*’ power structure. “Gerald can talk in riddles sometimes,” Manly says. “So it was a little hard to tell exactly what was happening.”

Several hours later, in Portland, Oregon, David Barstow was returning to his hotel room. Barstow was a four-year veteran of the *Times*. After graduating from Northwestern, he spent three years as a reporter on *The Rochester Times-Union*. Then he moved to Florida

to work on *The St. Petersburg Times*, one of the best regional papers in the country. It was in Florida that Barstow learned how to respond to the pressure of producing the day's big story. "When I got [to *The New York Times*] I got down on my knees and thanked God that I didn't get hired here when I was in my twenties. I was not ready," Barstow says. "Everyone has this experience at some point: it's three o'clock and the spotlight swivels and you're the man and you need to deliver by six. [At *The St. Petersburg Times*], I was the go-to guy on a lot of big stories in a lot of weird circumstances. I'm glad I learned how to do that there." While in Florida, Barstow was a finalist for three Pulitzer Prizes in three separate categories—breaking news, investigative reporting, and explanatory reporting. At the *Times*, Barstow did a brief stint in metro before becoming one of the linchpins of the paper's investigative unit.

Barstow can be an intimidating presence in the newsroom. He's tenacious and fearless and gets so immersed in projects that he essentially disappears down a wormhole for weeks at a time. In Portland, he was working on a follow-up to a three-part series he had co-authored in January on McWane, Inc., a Birmingham, Alabama-based pipe company the *Times* called one of "the most dangerous employers in America." (The series won the 2003 George Polk Award, the 2003 James Aronson Award, the 2004 du-Pont Award, the 2004 Goldsmith Prize and the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for public service journalism, considered the Pulitzer's most prestigious newspaper award.) When Barstow arrived at his hotel the afternoon of May 2, he had several urgent messages telling him to call Gerald Boyd. Barstow called Paul Fishleder, his editor back in New York, who told him that he didn't know what the calls were about, either. Even though that day's *Times* had

run Steinberg's story about Blair's resignation, and the newsroom had been rife with speculation about the former reporter for days, Barstow didn't know anything about the situation. "I was deep into my other story," he says. "I hadn't heard anything about it."

Barstow's first desk at the *Times*, back in the spring of 1999, was across from Blair. Barstow isn't involved in the *Times*' social scene, and because he naturally avoids people who seem to crave the spotlight, he never got to know the young reporter well. But he saw enough to know he wasn't impressed. "On his best day," Barstow says, "he was sort of mediocre."

In the meantime, Steinberg, Liptak, and Glater worked on dividing up what was in front of them. They quickly realized the difficulties of investigating one of their colleagues. "You're suddenly looking at the newsroom as sources of information," Steinberg says. Colleagues began to email the three reporters with tidbits about Jayson's time at the paper's police headquarters, nicknamed the "cop shop," or pointing out stories they remembered as being not quite right. "Almost as soon as we put word out, my phone started ringing," Liptak says. "Lots of people had lots to say. So right off the bat, we're working these two tracks—trying to get a fix on who Jayson is and was, and trying to re-report the damn stories."

Rather than meet out in the open, the three reporters gathered in a small, windowless room that sits right outside the greeter's desk on the third floor. The first thing the team did was draw up a list of documents they wanted access to. The list they came up with

included all the obvious things—all of Blair’s articles from the *Times*, examples of Blair’s work at *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*, where he had worked before joining the *Times*, and stories from other news organizations that covered the same topics. They also requested internal communications about Blair or his work at the paper, his application and resume, all his employee evaluations, his personnel file, his reimbursement requests, and any internal memos tracking corrections or error rates. Adam Liptak and Jonathan Glater—the team’s two attorneys—signed the request, and sent it on to Gerald Boyd. There still wasn’t a top editor assigned to oversee the project.

According to people in the newsroom who spoke with him at the time, Boyd was stunned by the request. “They couldn’t believe we didn’t wait to get an editor,” Steinberg says. “The normal *Times* protocol would be, editors talk to editors.” Boyd, according to several sources, redoubled his efforts to figure out who was going to lead the reporting team. “Fairly early on,” Liptak says, “it became clear this was not going to be good for anybody’s career.”

Everyone on the team had been chosen at that morning’s masthead meeting for a specific reason. Liptak was chosen because he was a recent convert from the legal department—“he had a kind of mental rigor that we thought would be hugely valuable,” says Al Siegal, the *Times* assistant managing editor who was eventually put in charge of the project. Steinberg, as one of the paper’s media writers, was an obvious choice: “this was the biggest story conceivably he’d need to deal with ever,” Siegal says. Barstow is one the paper’s top investigators. And Glater, in addition to being another lawyer, is black. “We

had decided on the other guys, and I said, Wait a minute, this group is awfully white,” Siegal says. “The fact that we had a reporter who was young and black and a lawyer was a no-brainer.”

Glenn Kramon, the *Times*' business editor, had a lunch meeting on May 2. He didn't get back to the Times until around 3 p.m., and by the time he made his way up to the third floor newsroom several people had already told him that Gerald Boyd wanted to talk to him. After one of the most stressful years of his career, Kramon had recently begun to feel more secure in his job at the *Times*. In the weeks before Howell Raines took over the paper in September 2001, he had made no secret about his desire to replace Kramon as the paper's business editor. Kramon, instead of sulking or resigning himself to his fate, dug in, and the business section's coverage of the corporate scandals that rocked the country in 2002 was exemplary. “It's no secret that Enron saved my job,” Kramon says.

Boyd told Kramon about the team that was being assembled to examine Blair's career at the *Times*, and asked Kramon to work on the project. “I had never worked with Jayson, which I think is one of the reasons they put me on this,” says Kramon. “I knew him to say hello to, but not much more than that. I did remember people warning me, ‘Boy, this guy is trouble.’”

Steinberg, Liptak and Glater, meanwhile, were realizing that a significant part of their job would include reporting on their colleagues—the reporters who shared bylines with Blair, the editors who assigned him stories, the managers who promoted him. No one on the team knew about Blair’s sloppiness, or the widespread concern about his work on the metro desk, but it didn’t take long for word to trickle out. “It became clear that we could not do this and work in the newsroom,” Steinberg says. “Already at that point, we’re digging up memos, we’re getting a paper trail going. We could already see that there had been issues with Jayson that were brought to people’s attention from way back. So I went to Gerald and said, ‘You gotta get us a place to work.’ Within an hour, there were tech people coming through the newsroom with carts and taking our computers off our desks.” The team was moved to the 11th floor, to a temporary office space.

Outside of the third floor newsroom, the 11th floor is among the busiest in the Times’ headquarters. The paper’s cafeteria is on the east side of the building, through a pair of defunct turnstiles. The building’s ATM machine is there as well, and beyond that, on the west side of the headquarters, is a catchall office space. On one side are several rows of desks, where reporters sometimes come when they’re working in teams or on special projects. The other side houses the workspace for *The Times Magazine*’s special supplement sections, such as Men’s Fashions of The Times. In May 2003, James Glantz and Eric Lipton were in a room off the back, working on their book about the World Trade Center, *City in the Sky*. It was here that the team was first moved. “There was no way to get any privacy here,” says Steinberg. They asked news administration to try to find a more secluded location.

That afternoon Glater, Liptak, and Steinberg, along with Manly and Kramon, assembled around a squawk box in one of the business department's conference rooms and called Barstow in Portland. It was the first official meeting of the team that would come to be called the Blair Witch Project. The meeting—and the assignment the team was asked to complete—was unprecedented in the history of *The New York Times*. The closest parallel to a published report on the paper's doings was an April 1, 1963 report filed by Abe Raskin, documenting the causes and repercussions of the 114-day newspaper strike that crippled the paper. (Raskin filed what amounted to a follow-up in 1974, detailing another bout labor trouble for the *Times* and the city's papers.) But the 1962-1963 newspaper strike had affected not only the *Times*, it had shut down all nine of the city's daily papers, crippling the entire industry. The mayor's office and then the White House got involved with the negotiations. Thousands of jobs and millions of readers were affected—Raskin estimated in his story that “600,000,000 daily and Sunday papers went unprinted.” The *Times* had to cover the newspaper strike if it had any hope of reestablishing itself in readers' daily routines.

Outside of that report, *The New York Times'* history of reporting on its own doings is spotty. On May 6, 1964, at the height of race tensions in New York, the *Times* published a front-page story about the Blood Brothers, a black youth gang in Harlem that was reportedly recruiting and training forces planning to kill whites. The article, by staff writer Junius Griffin, relied heavily on police accounts that the gang numbered about 400

youths, as young as 12, who were being trained by dissident Black Muslims and were suspected in four recent murders of whites in Harlem.

Almost immediately, the story was criticized. On May 11, the *Times* reported on page 27 that the NAACP challenged law enforcement to prove the gang existed. “No doubt hoodlum groups do exist throughout the city and the crime rate is alarming, but it is inequitable, immoral and dangerously inflammable to scandalize an entire community on the basis of the flimsy evidence offered to date,” the NAACP said in a statement. The story was blamed by many in the black community for fanning the flames that led to the riots that July in Harlem, which engulfed the city for five days. Griffin, the reporter, would eventually resign. The story is now generally acknowledged to have wildly been exaggerated, if not completely made up, but the *Times* has never published a retraction or correction of any kind relating to the Blood Brothers.

More recently, when the *Times* was faced with potential scandals concerning its journalistic standards, it had chosen to address the matter quietly and privately—if at all. In 1991, when executive editor Max Frankel published a profile that identified Patricia Bowman, the woman who had accused William Kennedy Smith of rape, there was outrage in the newsroom that the *Times* had named an alleged rape victim. Anna Quindlen, then a *Times* op-ed columnist, wrote a critical piece, calling the Bowman piece a “mistake.” Other news outlets wrung their hands about the collapsing standards at the Good Grey Lady. But outside of a defensive editor’s note, published nine days after the initial story ran, the *Times* remained silent on the controversy.

Seven years later, under Joe Lelyveld, the *Times* once again was subject to criticism from within the staff. This time, the subject was the initial paroxysm of the Monica Lewinsky coverage. The paper, some staffers felt, had ignored its own rules about sourcing and attribution in an effort to bite off a chunk of the story that was overwhelming the country. Lelyveld, who had been named executive editor in 1993, didn't commission a reported review or order up an editor's note. Instead, he asked Marty Baron, an associate managing editor (and now the editor of *The Boston Globe*), who had been on vacation in Mexico when the story broke, to review the paper's coverage. It was not an easy task for Baron, who was uncomfortable criticizing his colleagues' decisions and understood both their intentions and the difficulty of the decisions they had to make. "I feel a bit uneasy evaluating our performance in the matter of sourcing during the first wave of Lewinsky stories," Baron wrote. "At the height of the frenzy, the biggest decision I had to make was whether dinner would be sea bass a la Veracruzana or chicken with mole sauce."

Baron's report, which was circulated only internally, was harshly critical of the sourcing in two lead stories. He accused his colleagues of "repeating sensational reports...without confirming them," "questionable exercises in mind-reading," "passive voice...as a substitute for sourcing," "speculation," and "overstatement based on evidence seen or heard." But the readers of the *Times* never learned of Baron's criticisms; indeed, for the most part the paper publicly defended its Lewinsky coverage.

Almost three years later, Lelyveld again had to ask one of the paper's insiders to conduct a review of reporting that had come under fire. This time the subject was Wen Ho Lee, a

Chinese-American scientist who was fired from Los Alamos for security violations in March 1999. Over the next year and a half, the *Times* was often out in front of the story, and just as often drew fire from media critics and Lee's defenders, who argued the *Times'* coverage had resulted in a witch hunt.

When the din got too loud to ignore, Lelyveld asked David Jones, the former national editor who had competed with Lelyveld for the managing editor's position under Max Frankel, to review the paper's work. "Joe wanted me to just examine the coverage and tell him what I thought," Jones says. "It wasn't an assignment I was looking forward to. When Joe first came to me, I said, 'Let this cup pass from my lips.' But I was under contract."

Jones was allowed to interview anyone on staff, with the exception of the reporters who wrote the articles. At the end of his investigation, he called Lelyveld and Bill Keller, the paper's managing editor—he didn't want to write anything down, lest it get leaked and be used against the *Times* in the future. Jones told the top editors that too much credulity had been given to the prosecutors, that there was a lack of adequate balance in the coverage, and that internal disputes between the science reporters and the investigative reporters contributed to the problem.

Lelyveld and Keller, Jones says, seemed to agree. They commissioned an editor's note, and on Tuesday, September 26, 2000, the paper ran a 1,600-word, un-bylined, page 2 "From the Editors" column. The column didn't satisfy anyone. The *Times* reporters and

editors who had been involved in the project felt attacked, and the paper's critics were unappeased. The piece read:

As a rule, we prefer to let our reporting speak for itself. In this extraordinary case, the outcome of the prosecution and the accusations leveled at this newspaper may have left many readers with questions about our coverage. That confusion -- and the stakes involved, a man's liberty and reputation -- convince us that a public accounting is warranted. ... In those instances where we fell short of our standards in our coverage of this story, the blame lies principally with those who directed the coverage, for not raising questions that occurred to us only later. Nothing in this experience undermines our faith in any of our reporters, who remained persistent and fair-minded in their newsgathering in the face of some fierce attacks.

When Raines decided to turn his reporters loose on Jayson Blair, he called David Jones at home and asked him to oversee the assignment. Jones was no longer under contract to The Times, and, to his relief, was able to refuse. "This time," Jones says, "I did let the cup pass from my lips."

By Friday evening, the paper's top editors agreed to dedicate at least one more reporter to the project. Kramon called Abby Goodnough, a woman on the paper's metro staff. "We needed someone else to help, at least just with the writing and wrapping it all together," Kramon says. "I was aware too that this was an all-male team." But Goodnough was out for the evening, and didn't get the call until the next day. Kramon also asked Joan Nocevera, the weekend editor, if she would call Dan Barry, one of the paper's metro columnists. Barry is rangy, irascible reporter who cut his teeth at *The Providence Journal*. He grew up in Long Island, and the past several years had been overwhelming ones: he'd been diagnosed with cancer, had gone through chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and had written a memoir titled *Pull Me Up*. Barry can be aggressive, and he

rubs some people the wrong way. Barry intimidated even Blair, who made a point of befriending as many people as he could. But after Blair's story on Rev. Sloan, Barry had sent Blair a congratulatory note. "It was a good story," Barry says. "I told him so." Blair so disbelieved that he would ever get a congratulatory note from Barry he thought someone had hacked in to the columnist's computer as a joke.

By the time Barry's name was put forward, he was already at home in New Jersey. Before Barry made up his mind, he called Jon Landman, the paper's metro editor, on his cell phone. Landman was at Yankee Stadium for the first game of a three-game series with the Oakland A's. "I hadn't had the assignment explained to me by Glenn or anyone else," Barry says. "I basically just wanted to know what the deal was. It sounded like kind of an internal affairs thing—like the assignment would involve going around and pulling people aside, include our superiors. And I wanted to be assured that this was going to be an endeavor of integrity."

"Anytime you're doing a project that might end up casting a really bad light on the people who run the joint...these issues come up," says Landman. "By that time, things were pretty poisonous. But I told him to do it. I thought it would be good for the paper. And I didn't think anyone would let the process be corrupted." At 11:30 that night, Dan Barry called back to the *Times* newsroom with the following message: "I'm in." The team was assembled.

On Saturday, May 3, Dan Barry, David Barstow, Jonathan Glater, Glenn Kramon, Adam Liptak, Lorne Manly, and Jacques Steinberg met in their temporary quarters on the 11th floor of *The New York Times* to discuss their assignment. The marching orders were vague. The team was told to root out Blair's errors and correct the record. At that point, they still weren't sure if that meant they would be writing a story and supplying a list of corrections, or just focusing on the errors. Jayson Blair had worked at the *Times* for four years. Were they expected to look at all his stories? Only the ones from the previous year? "We had no idea how deep this went," says Barstow, who had flown back the night before from Portland. "It was literally a reporting problem: How do you begin? How do you attack the story? So we decided to focus first on the work he did on the national staff. That's a more manageable series of time"—about six months—"and it was logical to us that if he was going to pull any funny business it would be easier to do on a longer leash."

By that time, the research staff had printed out stacks of Jayson's clips, and the five reporters started to divide them up. David Barstow and Adam Liptak dove into the sniper pile, Jonathan Glater took the Jessica Lynch pile, and Jacques Steinberg grabbed the missing soldiers pile. Dan Barry, meanwhile, was looking at the arc of Blair's career and trying to piece together early details about his rise in journalism. By now, the working assumption was the final product would run somewhere around 2,500 words, and would be in the paper the following Tuesday or Wednesday, May 6 or 7.

By this point, the team was realizing the degree to which the increasingly dysfunctional culture of the *Times* had impacted Blair's career, especially in its latter stages. The

Times—and every newspaper in the country—has always had its share of editors and reporters who felt disenfranchised or resentful. But under Howell Raines, the anger and frustration that normally simmered just below the surface seemed to explode. There was such fear of Raines’ temper and dismissive attitude that some editors said they kept concerns about shoddy stories or reporters to themselves. The more warning signs and public admonishments scattered throughout Blair’s files the reporters uncovered, the more they became aware of a culture that seemed to frustrate an open exchange of information, an exchange that likely would have prevented Blair from ever getting assigned to the sniper story in the first place. That weekend, the reporters uncovered an April 2002 email from Jon Landman that seemed particularly damning. The email, sent to newsroom administrators, said “We have to stop Jayson from writing for the *Times*. Right now.” Barstow says, “we were already seeing that there were going to be some pretty awkward questions that we were going to have to ask our bosses.”

The final product of the team’s work was a mammoth, 14,000-word report that ran over four inside pages of the paper on Sunday, May 11. Two pages contained the narrative of Jayson Blair and his career at the *Times*; two pages dealt with the enormous number of corrections needed on Blair’s stories. On Friday, May 9, the team banged out the final version of their story. They knew many on the paper’s staff were hoping for a takedown of Howell Raines. “It was pretty palpable that week that there were a sizable number of people on *The New York Times* that wanted this to be the story of Howell Raines,” Barstow says. “This one incident at long last revealed all the pent-up grievances about Howell’s tenure as executive editor. And it wasn’t that we didn’t feel this was a valid

subject of inquiry down the road, but on this story, our assignment was to explain Jayson Blair. And even just writing about how he carried all this out was going to mean we were pushing our 6,000-word limit [for two of the *Times*' inside pages]. It was ludicrous to try to attempt to do a broader exposé on the fight between [Washington editor] Jill Abramson and Howell Raines. But that was what a sizable contingent in the newsroom wanted.”

“We all in some way love the institution,” says Barstow. “It’s a complicated love, but there was a sense that the best service we could do here was use all of our combined skills to do the most complete job we could humanly do.

“I remember thinking before that the great lesson in American history is that the cover-up is worse than the crime. We wanted this work to represent the fullest picture possible. I was astonished at what had happened to Arthur Anderson – here’s this great institution, and it is no more because of shredded documents. We wanted to make sure that didn’t happen here.”

Saturday, May 10, Catherine Mathis was at her weekend home in New Jersey. Mathis, the *Times*' relentlessly cheery spokeswoman, openly admits she has “drunk the Kool-Aid” when it comes to *The New York Times*. Unlike previous *Times* spokespeople, Mathis doesn’t treat media reporters as if they are an annoyance, and she doesn’t act like she is doing favors when she parcels out information.

Like the rest of the media world, Mathis was waiting for the *Times*' story on Jayson Blair to land. The bulldog edition hits newsstands by late Saturday afternoon, and some stories are posted even earlier on the paper's website. At 1 PM that Saturday, pieces of the *Times* report began to be posted on the web. The completed version, posted soon after, clocked in at 7,165 words, or two full pages of the Sunday paper. Two more pages and another 6,581 words were spent correcting errors in Blair's stories.

"A staff reporter for *The New York Times* committed frequent acts of journalistic fraud while covering significant news events in recent months," the piece began.

The widespread fabrication and plagiarism represent a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper. The reporter, Jayson Blair, misled readers and Times colleagues with dispatches that purported to be from Maryland, Texas and other states, when often he was far away, in New York. He fabricated comments. He concocted scenes. He lifted material from newspapers and wire services. ...

Every newspaper, like every bank and every police department, trusts its employees to uphold central principles, and the inquiry found that Mr. Blair repeatedly violated the cardinal tenet of journalism, which is simply truth. ...

The Times inquiry also establishes that various editors and reporters expressed misgivings about Mr. Blair's reporting skills, maturity and behavior during his five-year journey from raw intern to reporter on national news events. ...

The investigation suggests several reasons Mr. Blair's deceits went undetected for so long: a failure of communication among senior editors; few complaints from the subjects of his articles; his savviness and his ingenious ways of covering his tracks. Most of all, no one saw his carelessness as a sign that he was capable of systematic fraud.

Mr. Blair was just one of about 375 reporters at The Times; his tenure was brief. But the damage he has done to the newspaper and its employees will not completely fade with next week's editions, or next month's, or next year's.

"It's a huge black eye," said Arthur Sulzberger Jr., chairman of The New York Times Company and publisher of the newspaper, whose family has owned a controlling interest in The Times for 107 years. "It's an abrogation of the trust between the newspaper and its readers."

The piece was both an excoriation of the Jayson Blair saga as well as an explanation, but at its heart, The *Times*' story was a great yarn. It featured massive fraud, a charismatic con man, and a powerful institution brought to its knees. The piece also would serve as a roadmap for much of what was to come. It flicked at the problems that had arisen since Howell Raines took over the *Times*, touched on Gerald Boyd's and Blair's perceived relationship, and addressed the widespread frustration of mid-level editors at the *Times*.

There was notable precedent for newspapers reporting on themselves in the wake of such scandals. In 1982, when Janet Cooke, a young reporter at *The Washington Post*, was discovered to have completely fabricated the story of Jimmy, an eight-year old heroin addict—a story which won that year's Pulitzer Prize on feature reporting—the *Post*'s ombudsman wrote the definitive account of the incident. In 1984, The Wall Street Journal broke the news that it had fired one of its business columnists, R. Foster Winans, after he acknowledged to the Securities and Exchange Commission his involvement in an insider-trading scheme. And in 1999, it was revealed that *Los Angeles Times* business executives had agreed to split the profits from a 164-page Sunday magazine with the magazine's subject, the new Staples Center downtown arena—essentially passing off advertising as editorial product. With the newsroom in revolt, *Times* editors assigned media reporter David Shaw, a Pulitzer Prize-winner, to conduct an investigation. Six weeks later, the *Times* published the Shaw report: a 14-page special section titled “Crossing the Line.” The scandal precipitated the sale of the newspaper's parent company, Times Mirror, to Tribune Co., and to the departure of Downing, Parks and Times-Mirror chairman Mark Willes.

Still, these cases were spread out over decades. Before 2003, there had been no accepted practice for dealing with internal scandals. Sometimes, the criticism was left to other news organizations. Sometimes the scandals were dealt with quietly, if at all. The case of Jayson Blair, and the *Times*' response to the incident, likely changed that forever. From now on, there will be an expectation that news organizations police themselves with the same prosecutorial zeal they bring to investigating outside institutions.

For an example, look to former *USA Today* reporter Jack Kelley, a Pulitzer finalist in 2002, who resigned from the newspaper in January 2004. The paper had been investigating, for about seven months, four stories Kelley wrote after receiving an anonymous note from a staffer raising questions that some of Kelley's work had been embellished. The note came during the Blair fallout, in June 2003, after executive editor Brian Gallagher emailed the newsroom calling on anyone who had concerns about accuracy at the newspaper to report it to him.

Mark Memmott, a veteran *USA Today* reporter and former editor, was assigned to investigate Kelley's earlier work. A handful of stories were earmarked for review. Before the probe was concluded, and before any corrections were published, Kelley resigned. *USA Today* published its first story on the investigation and resignation on January 13, an 1800-word piece that ran on page 5A. The piece said the investigation was over and notes: "Left unresolved is the question at the foundation of the inquiry: whether Kelley might have embellished or fabricated stories."

That response didn't satisfy anyone. Media watchdogs cried foul, and *USA Today*'s own staffers felt betrayed by their own management and wondered how they were supposed to

accept the notion that no one would ever answer whether Jack Kelley had made up stories that appeared in the pages of their newspaper. Three days later, on January 16, *USA Today* announced “an independent review” of all of Kelley’s work at the paper, which dated to 1982. An editor’s note on page 3A explained: “In the days since Kelley’s termination, new questions have arisen. They raise enough concerns that we feel we need to vet Kelley’s record completely and report the results publicly.”

In March, *USA Today* published an interim report on the panel’s findings in its pages, saying that “the team of journalists has found strong evidence that Kelley fabricated substantial portions of at least eight major stories, lifted nearly two dozen quotes or other material from competing publications, lied in speeches he gave for the newspaper and conspired to mislead those investigating his work.”

The end of the twentieth century saw an enormous explosion in media coverage, as the ubiquity of the Internet (and the natural solipsism of journalists) created an environment in which anyone who fancied himself a modern-day Liebling had the means to make his voice heard. But with their Jayson Blair report, *The New York Times* showed, once again, its ability to not only set the national news agenda but to help codify the ways in which American journalistic institutions respond to ethical problems in their own midst.

The fallout of the Blair fiasco, however, will likely do more than simply change our expectations for how media institutions handle their internal problems; it also has the potential to radically alter the way newspaper employees are trained and how they

newspapers operate. After Blair's resignation, *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger agreed to fund several new senior-level positions that were designed to shore up the *Times*' standards and improve its training. They included an ombudsman—which the *Times* termed a “Public Editor”—whose full-time job would be to investigate and answer outsiders' concerns about the *Times*' coverage; a standards editor, to codify the *Times*' practices on everything from crediting of stringers to the use of anonymous sources; and a career development editor. Both the standards editor and the career development editor would be masthead-level positions.

All three positions had been filled by the end of 2003. Daniel Okrent, a former top editor at Time Inc. (and the inventor of Rotisserie League baseball) was named the paper's public editor; he signed a non-renewable, eighteen-month contract. Al Siegal was officially named standards editor, the post he had essentially been filling for years. And Glenn Kramon became the paper's career development editor.

By March 2004, Kramon had helped oversee a major overhaul of the way the paper trained and evaluated employees and managers alike. Newsroom leaders would be required to take two-day management training programs, which, according to a memo Kramon sent to the newsroom, covered “communicating; writing and delivering annual reviews; ethics, standards and accuracy; recruiting and vetting job candidates; our employee assistance program; managing a budget and more.” Annual reviews were made mandatory for everyone in the newsroom. The *Times*' database editor began working on

creating a list of every job at the paper, so staffers could ask to be considered for future openings anywhere from Hong Kong to Broadway.

“This can be a big, scary place,” says Kramon. “And there was an attitude that once you were here, you just had to survive.” Now, he says, that’s changed, hopefully permanently, although Kramon knows it’s an uphill struggle to make any reform stick in an environment in which time is always in short supply and it’s often easier to fix problems instead of teaching people how to avoid them. But for now, at least, new hires at the *Times* get something akin to freshman orientation: There are mandatory sessions to teach new employees about the *Times* standards and practices, cocktail parties (including ones at new managing editors Jill Abramson’s and John Geddes’s New York apartments), and a prescribed mentoring system. “It used to be, you could be here for years and never get formally introduced [around the newsroom],” Kramon says. No longer.

These changes are, not surprisingly, being watched carefully within the journalism profession. In the spring of 2004, *The Washington Post* appointed longtime reporter and editor Peter Perl to be the paper’s Director of Training and Professional Management, a newly created post. “This was another of our periodic realizations that we can do a better job in managing people,” says Perl. “My whole mission here is to try and improve communication that too often is top-down without there being enough bottom-up.”

These changes are, in their own way, admirable, even if they are long overdue. Still, more work remains to be done towards establishing safeguards designed to catch faulty

information before it gets into print. In the last decade, the country's two main newsweeklies—*Time* and *Newsweek*—eliminated their fact-checking departments due to budget constraints; the recent journalistic scandals have not rectified that. And while a traditional fact checking process would obviously be impossible at a daily newspaper—constraints on time preclude having a team of editorial employees on-hand to essentially re-report stories before they run—there *are* several possible solutions, all of which have been met with almost complete indifference in the industry.

The first safeguard would entail spot checks on randomly selected stories. These checks would either be done after the story has run, or, if time allowed, before publication. These options have been discussed in the industry for years, but have never gained traction.

Nicholas Lemann, the dean of Columbia's Journalism School, proposed a system similar to this in his *New Yorker* review of Jayson Blair's memoir. "God is not going to stop making charismatic maniacs," Lemann wrote, "so it falls to newspapers to figure out how to do a better job of apprehending them." In March 2004, a single paper, *The Fort-Worth Star Telegram*, decided to perform pre-publication checks on several local stories each month. So far, it's the only major daily newspaper in the country to do so.

Another option is random post-publication surveys sent to sources quoted in stories.

Media watchdog Steve Brill has long instituted such a policy at his magazines, including the now-defunct media publication *Brill's Content*. Brill's surveys were helpful, and not only because they caught reporters intent on fabrication—they also let reporters know what the subjects thought of the work. "The whole notion that you can't protect against a

reporter who's determined to lie to you is ridiculous," says Brill, whose surveys helped nab a reporter at one of his legal publications who had been faking interviews. "If you have random checks you *can* protect yourself."

Speaking of the fabricated story Jayson Blair wrote about the family of Jessica Lynch, Brill says, "The only way you'd find out if he made up what her house looked like was if [her family] got a self addressed, stamped envelope with a survey. Maybe then they would have filled it out and sent it back. They certainly weren't going to call up Howell Raines and complain."

Brill told Arthur Sulzberger about his post-publication surveys, but to no avail. "The consensus here, post Blair, was that [fact checking] is unlikely to be effective," Sulzberger wrote to me in an email. "The most plausible argument FOR spot checking is that if reporters know they might be fact-checked, they'll be more careful. But here, they'd know that the odds are slim of getting fact-checked, and some whole categories (foreign news, intelligence coverage, much diplomatic coverage) would be hard to reliably fact-check. What we have done instead is to try to be much more aggressive about responding to signs of suspicion, areas where questions are raised within the paper, from outside, or through the public editor."

Another standard explanation for the industry's tepid response to such safeguards is that journalism is a field that's built on trust—the trust between a reporter and his source, the trust between a writer and his editor, the trust between a publication and its readers. This,

of course, is true, just as it's true that there's an obvious code of honor among the overwhelming majority of working journalists: Make your work your own; stick to the facts; don't take people's quotes out of context. But this hardly seems satisfying or reassuring. After all, virtually all of civil society is built on unspoken bonds of trust—and yet we still have police forces and judicial systems. It's a given that a free and vigorous press is one of the most important hallmarks of a healthy democracy, but with that freedom comes a responsibility to ensure a certain level of quality control. It's up to the journalistic community to begin better policing itself. So why isn't this happening?

“The answer is very simple,” says Lemann. “I don't know.” Brill is equally confused: “It's mystifying.”