Journalistic Credibility in Deceptive Times

Reporters and publishers face a newly cynical public

BY BRUCE GOLDFARB

The credibility of journalism—never held in high regard by the public—sustained a severe drubbing by the recent rash of plagiarism and deception in the media, particularly the chicanery of former New York Times reporter Jayson Blair.

Repercussions from the revelations about Blair are spreading far beyond the august and heretofore respectable Times and are being felt throughout the industry—from large newsrooms to small papers to publishers of trade newsletters.

"Everybody is reexamining their ethics, practices, and principles," says John X. Miller, public editor of the Detroit Free Press. "The issue of media credibility across the spectrum—radio, television, and newspapers—is suspect from day one. We had work to do before Jayson Blair, and now we have even more work to do."

Charges of plagiarism are snaring large fish and small. Unethical cribbing spiked the careers of former Chicago Tribune foreign correspondent Jonathan Broder, author Doris Kearns Goodwin, former Boston Globe legend Mike Barnicle, and Business Week writer Marcia Stepanek.

In January 2002, popular historian Stephen Ambrose was accused of lifting sections of his best-selling book The Wild Blue, about B-24 bomber crews during World War II, from Thomas Childers’ Wings of Morning. Ambrose admitted that his attribution was not as clear as it should have been. The transgression was a downbeat coda to a long and distinguished writing career, as Ambrose died of cancer the following October.

Mooresstown (NJ) high school student Blair L. Hornstine, who won a lawsuit to be named the sole valedictorian of her graduating class, admitted in a June 3, 2003, column in the Cherry Hill Courier-Post that she plagiarized material in three articles and two essays she wrote for the paper.

Charges of plagiarism erupted—of all places—over an article for academics about how to detect plagiarism in the classroom. Michael Heberling, president of the Baker College Center for Graduate Studies in Flint, MI, noticed something familiar in an article by retired Florida Atlantic University professor William Ryan and graduate student Lindsey Hamlin that appeared in the May
2003 issue of Syllabus magazine: Heberling’s own words from an article on the same subject published last year. Hamlin reportedly apologized for the offense in an e-mail to Heberling.

How can editors know for sure that copy turned in by writers is legitimate? “You can’t,” says Dan Schwartz, newsletter publisher at Lippincott Williams & Wilkins in Baltimore, MD. “You have to take people at their word.”

With more than 20 newsletters under his direction, Schwartz depends on the integrity of freelance writers and editors. “The best you can do is spell out very clearly what is expected of your writers and work with people whom you trust, known commodities with a track record you’ve worked with in the past.”

Pulling the wool over editors and readers
Aside from lifting material from other sources, Blair used sophisticated techniques enabled by modern technology to deceive his editors at the Times. With a cell phone and laptop computer, Blair was able to make editors think that he was on the road covering a story when in fact he was at home in his apartment.

Perhaps an even more notorious case of journalistic deception is Janet Cooke’s 1980 Washington Post article about “Jimmy,” an eight-year-old heroin addict who existed only in her imagination. Cooke won a Pulitzer for her charade was exposed and she left the paper in disgrace.

Former New Republic rising star Stephen Glass fabricated facts, details, and quotes in dozens of articles over a period of years. To back up his elaborate confabulation, Glass created fake voicemails, fake e-mails, and even a fake Web site. In an effort to turn his infamy into lemonade, Glass wrote a thinly veiled novel of his life and experiences titled The Fabulist.

In July 2003, the Roswell (NM) Daily Record fired sports editor Gregory M. Jones for lifting a quote from the movie Caddyshack for his otherwise dull and routine story about a Father’s Day golf tournament. Discussing a new kind of grass unveiled for the event, Jones quoted “Carl Spangler” as saying, “This is a hybrid...of bluegrass, Kentucky bluegrass, featherbed bent, and northern California sensemilia. The amazing stuff about this, is that you can play 36 holes on it in the afternoon, take it home and just get stoned to the bejeezus-belt that night on the stuff.”

Funny when Bill Murray spoke the lines in the movie, but not amusing in a legit sports story.

Deception of the type employed by Jayson Blair should have been picked up by audits of his expense reports, says the Free Press’ Miller. “Expense accounts are scrutinized at most newspapers, sometimes even more closely than the articles themselves,” he says.

Opening the editorial offices
One characteristic that allowed the Times to get into its unenviable position is a newsroom layered with bureaucracy that was unresponsive to readers who complained or caught errors. “Readers could not penetrate the newsroom,” says Miller. “There was nobody to take the grievance to, and once they did find someone it wasn’t resolved.”

At the Free Press, Miller’s job is to link the newsroom with the public with issues of readership and credibility. One of his duties is to compile and distribute a daily list of e-mails and phone calls from readers. “Readers are helping keep us honest,” he says.

Careful tracking of errors and corrections—70 to 80 percent of which are called in by readers—helps identify problems at the paper. “We look very
closely at the number of corrections and the reasons behind them.”

In an effort to reestablish credibility with readers, a growing number of papers are publishing the names and numbers of public editors or reader representatives to contact with corrections and complaints.

**Disbelieving your eyes**
The deception and trickery of the media is no longer limited to the printed word. Photo-manipulation software widely available today makes it remarkably easy to fake digital images.

In recent years, digitally altered and “sweetened” images have crept into mainstream media—without adequately informing readers. We expect camera tricks and computer-generated images (CGIs) when we go to the movies, but not while watching television news or reading a newspaper or magazine.

Some newspapers took liberties with reality while covering the Iraq war. On April 1, 2003, the front page of the Los Angeles Times featured an image by photographer Brian Walski of a British soldier and Iraqi civilians outside Basra. The photo also appeared prominently in the Chicago Tribune, the Hartford Courant, and many other papers.

The photo was identified as a fake by an alert Hartford Courant reader who noted a curious pattern of repetition in the crowd. When questioned by his editors by telephone from Iraq, Walski admitted using Photoshop to combine two images taken moments apart. Named 2001 Photographer of the Year by the California Press Photographers Association, he was fired by the LA Times and now finds his career in the tubes.

“Everybody was shocked,” says Jim Preston, assistant managing editor for photography at the Baltimore Sun, which also ran the photo on its front page.

The rules for photo manipulation have traditionally been looser for magazines, particularly fashion magazines. In recent years, a number of cases have ventured into the gray zone—some say too far.

In February 1994, a front-page photo composition showed the unlikely pairing of Tanya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan practicing on the ice together. Although small print identified the photo as a composite, for many readers the image overpowered the words.

In 1995, Time magazine darkened O.J. Simpson's mug shot to make him appear more sinister, whether deliberate or not. The magazine might have gotten away with the deception had Newsweek not run the unaltered photo on its cover during the same week.

As software like Photoshop becomes more ubiquitous, manipulation of images is becoming more common. Actress Kate Winslet complained about the doctoring of her cover photo from the February 2003 issue of GQ magazine. Winslet claimed that the magazine slimmed the size of her legs—of which she was not ashamed—by a third. Redbook was accused of faking photos on its cover twice in as many months, with Jennifer Aniston's image on the June cover and Julia Roberts on the July cover.

Faking a photo in a fluffy magazine is one thing, while altering an image in a news publication is something else entirely. As the “first draft of history,” the media have an obligation to document events truthfully and accurately.

The emergence of digital manipulation in the pages of newspapers threatens to destroy the last shred of credibility. “We’ve really hurt ourselves,” says Preston. “We’ve begun to erode the fundamental believability of a photograph. Our integrity is all we have with readers. Once you start to erode that, you don’t get it back.”

At stake are the credibility and reputation of journalism in all its forms—print, television, electronic, and photographic. The ethical and moral decisions we face every day weigh heavily in the minds of readers, now more so than ever. Compromising integrity may be expedient in the short term, whether to meet a deadline or make a story better, but in the long term it does irreparable harm to the profession.

Bruce Goldfarb is an independent journalist in Baltimore, MD. He can be found at www.brucegoldfarb.com.