

What Jayson Blair and Janet Cooke say about the Press and the
Erosion of Public Trust*

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Abstract

The authors of this paper examine key decision-making points in both the 1980-1 Janet Cooke fabrication case at the *Washington Post* and the deceptions of Jayson Blair at the *New York Times* that stretch from 1999 to 2003. These decisions are weighed against the commonly understood mission of journalism in general and the specifically stated missions at the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. The paper's working thesis is that if newspapers do not consistently measure their decisions and actions against their mission as a public trust, their commitment to truth can become shrouded by less noble motives like ambition and the thrill of a scoop.

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Introduction

For all the ink that has been spent exploring Jayson Blair's immolation inside his master's house, the need for deeper answers seems insatiable.

- How could Blair's falsifications have passed under the *New York Times*' radar after the hard-won lessons of the Janet Cooke case 23 years earlier (reinforced by numerous, similar deceptions in the interim)?
- How could the warning signs have been missed when they surfaced early in Blair's career at the University of Maryland, followed him to an internship at the *Boston Globe*, and plagued him during his four-year tenure at the *Times*?

While numerous reports have explored what happened and how, the questions about why still itch in the imagination. For some who were taken in by Blair's charm, the answer is in what went wrong in the mind of an energetic and talented, young reporter. For others who saw a more sinister face of Blair, the real question is why the discovery took so long (Rosen 2003). Pundits proffer explanations about editors who are too eager to diversify the staff or to forgive drug and alcohol abuse. While credible, they do not satisfy.

Janet Cooke's returned Pulitzer Prize in 1981 sent a warning flare that lit up weaknesses in the organizational culture of the *Washington Post*, which rewarded flamboyant, young talent for producing the showy story. The incident disgraced the profession. It also laid bare the ethics of editors too eager for the irresistible story and too lax in their acceptance of anonymous sources. It spotlighted human resources practices that failed to conduct even the most fundamental crosschecks. If reform followed from these lessons, it was short lived. A long string of fabricators have sawed large chunks out of journalism's credibility, a phenomenon most colorfully illustrated by Blair.

What do these incidents tell us? Are we glimpsing edges of a fundamental blind spot firmly embedded in the organizational culture of news organizations? If so, can full sight be restored and future catastrophic embarrassments be thwarted?

No reasonable person would suggest that a newspaper could meet its daily deadlines and operate a failsafe protection system against compulsive and clever liars on its staff. When safeguards are in place, they protect against reporters' inadvertent inaccuracies and misjudgments, not their purposeful deceptions. The bulk of the blame for disgrace rests with the

liars, not organizations that trusted them. Nevertheless, putting this preponderance of blame on the perpetrators does not absolve the profession. If this string of fabrications points to professional and institutional blind spots, journalists (and academics in the field) owe their own profession the same scrutiny they apply to others when wrongdoing is exposed.

Investigative reporters often apply a simple technique to uncover flaws in a government agency, corporate governance structure, or educational institution. They weigh evidence of the organization's performance against its stated or commonly understood mission. As *The Investigative Reporter's Handbook* instructs its followers: "Here are questions to ask on the way to launching a project: How is something supposed to work, and how well is it actually working? Who wins and who loses? Why? How?" (Houston et al., 2004, p. 4). When it is successful, the technique can yield a picture of the organization's ethical weaknesses as well as the causes.

The authors of this article examine key decision-making points in both the 1980-1 Janet Cooke fabrication case at the *Washington Post* and the deceptions of Jayson Blair at the *New York Times* that stretch from 1999 to 2003. These decisions are weighed against the commonly understood mission of journalism in general and the specifically stated missions at the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. The paper's thesis is that if newspapers do not consistently measure their decisions and actions against their mission as a public trust, their commitment to truth can become shrouded by less noble motives like ambition and the thrill of a scoop.

The entelechy of journalism as a public trust

In Aristotle's sense of the word, *entelechy* is the essential nature or informing principle of a living thing, its soul, or the condition in which its potential becomes its actuality (Brown 1993). The journalism profession has consistently defined its *entelechy*—or in more modern language, its mission—in terms of a public service or a public trust.

At the National Press Club in Washington, a plaque entitled "The Journalist's Creed" reads in part:

I believe in the profession of journalism. I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of a lesser service than public service is a betrayal of that trust (Rosen, 1999, p. 1).

Kovach and Rosensteel (2001) further explore this mission of journalism in *Elements of Journalism*, their published report for the Committee of Concerned Journalists. Their assertions stem, they explain, from what began as a gathering of 25 journalists at Harvard in

1997 to explore their concerns that the journalism profession was no longer “serving a larger public interest” and was instead “damaging it” (p. 10).

In their effort to correct the problem, Kovach and Rosenstein, on behalf of the Committee, set out to articulate journalism’s mission. “[T]he purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self governing,” they state. From that mission, follow nine elements that articulate the manner in which this purpose is to be fulfilled. The first three elements are most relevant to this paper:

1. Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth;
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens; and
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification (p. 12).

This articulation of journalism’s main mission is both well established and widely acknowledged. For example, Harrigan and Dunlap (2004) tell journalism students in their editing text, *The Editorial Eye*: “Years ago, Nelson Poynter, former publisher of the *St. Petersburg Times*, called the ownership of a newspaper ‘a sacred trust.’ He meant that the newspaper had an obligation to serve the community. ... This obligation separates journalism from other kinds of communication” (p. 6). And the American Society of Newspaper Editors states that its goal is: “To serve the general welfare by informing people” (p. 20). Every newspaper mission ASNE has on file advances a similar end. The stated missions at the *Post* and the *Times* follow this position. The *Washington Post*’s stylebook spells out that: “The newspaper’s duty is to its readers and to the public at large...” (Lippman, 1987, p. 7). The New York Times Company website under “Mission and Values” states as its core purpose to: “Enhance Society by creating, collecting and distributing high quality news, information and entertainment.” The first of its four core values is: “Content of the highest quality and integrity — This is the basis for our reputation and the means by which we fulfill the public trust and our customers’ expectations” (New York Times, 2004).

This mission of public trust, as we will try to show, is journalism’s guiding light by which it illuminates its primary values of truth, loyalty to citizens, and duty to verify. Without its light, these honored values diminish and other, less noble ones use the cover of darkness to move in undetected. In the Cooke and Blair cases, journalism’s primary mission of serving the public trust appears to have gained an almost taken-for-granted quality. As Walter Fisher (1989) explains this phenomenon, human beings, whom he believes are “storytellers” by nature, seek coherence in a story or mission. He calls this coherence “narrative probability” (p. 5). But journalists, like all people, continually test that narrative for its “fidelity” with their lived experience. What they find is that the words of the mission have begun to lose their meaning in

action. The mission has been replaced by a new narrative, one rooted in beating the competition, getting the best story, and winning the most prestigious awards. Journalism's mission should be its master metaphor, in Fisher's terms. It should be the ground on which journalistic action is the figure. But if the action continually fails to fit the mission, narrative fidelity will no longer reinforce the narrative probability, and the master metaphor, the central mission, will lose its hold.

If Fisher places this discussion in a narrative context, Michel Foucault (1995) adds to and expands it by adding the phenomenon of identity. Most people probably believe their identities are fixed and unwavering. Foucault, however, sees identity as discourse mediated, constantly morphing into countless permutations depending on various situations we enter. When used as a tool for analysis, Foucault's understanding of identity can shed new light on the actions of both Cooke and Blair.

Citizens need to understand — and in a democratic sense own — journalism's mission to ensure its proper functioning, yet evidence indicates that their appreciation, if not their apprehension, is slipping. In 1999, only 45 percent of Americans said they thought that the press protected democracy, down from 55 percent fourteen years earlier. In 1987, 41 percent of Americans thought the press cared about people. The number dropped to 21 percent by 1999. And while 58 percent said they respected the press's watchdog role, that number had been 67 percent in 1985 (Committee of Concerned Journalists and the Pew Research Center for People and the Press 1999, p. 79).

Between 1985 and 2002, the number of Americans who think news organizations are moral declined from 54 to 39 percent. Those who believe news organizations generally get the facts straight declined from 55 to 35 percent, and those who feel that news organizations care about the people they report on declined from 41 to 30 percent (Project for Excellence, 2004)

Politicians with a savvy sense of the public's attitude may be moving in quickly to take advantage of this drop in public confidence. Ken Auletta (2004) documents in his article "Fortress Bush: How the White House keeps the press under control" that the Bush White House bears a hostility toward the press that is by no means unique to this administration. What is new, Auletta says, is the administration's severely diminished sense that the press performs any legitimate public function. "They [reporters] don't represent the public any more than other people do," Andrew Card, Bush's chief of staff, told Auletta. "In our democracy, the people who represent the public stood for election. ... I don't believe you have a check-and-balance function." Card's attitude is not an isolated case, Auletta reports. "The White House has come to see

reporters as special pleaders—as if the press were simply another interest group, and, moreover, one that’s not nearly as powerful as it once was” (pp. 52-65).

Decision-making turning points in the Janet Cooke and Jayson Blair cases

By pairing, comparing, and contrasting the Cooke and Blair cases, we are able to point out key factors in the decision-making processes as well as organizational characteristics at the *Post* and *Times* that allowed these massive deceptions to go undetected in organizations dedicated to truth. Although Cooke and Blair are neither the first nor surely the last of the news falsification scandals (as Jack Kelly at *USAToday* has amply proven), they provide a set of bookends to examine what has or has not been learned in the 23 years between them. They both involve young, ambitious reporters; they raise similar issues about diversity; and they happened at newspapers similar enough in size and reputation to bear comparison.

With the wisdom of hindsight, we finger places where editors, other journalists, and even sources made choices to act or not to act in a manner that might have stopped Janet Cooke and Jayson Blair on their paths of deception. Such choices, after all, are at the heart of ethics. As Patterson and Wilkins (2002) say, for example: “[E]thics has come to mean learning to make rational choices between what is good and bad, what is morally justifiable action and what is not. Ethics also means distinguishing among choices, all of which may be morally justifiable, but some more so than others” (p. 3).

What is good in the decision makers’ actions, we assert, is what follows journalism’s stated mission as a public trust. The commitment to truth is rooted in this trust. If other principles are substituted for it, we further claim, truth will be replaced with other values. With these claims in mind, we look particularly at the values at play in the decisions made in these cases. We examine whether, when, and how other principles—such as hunger for a good story or desire for career advancement—appear to overtake and outweigh the newspaper’s commitment to the public.

We divide these key decision-making turning points into three categories. These three involve decisions of whether or not to:

1. notice, and then pass along a warning, about the reporter’s troubling behavior;
2. check anonymous sources; and
3. turn a blind eye to fabrications and plagiarism.

1. *Whether or not to notice, and then pass along a warning about, the reporter’s troubling behavior*

Cooke's troubling behavior began in 1979 with falsifications on her application to the *Washington Post*. Although these went undetected until after she had won the Pulitzer Prize, they proved to be her unraveling. Cooke told the *Post* that she had graduated from Vassar and obtained a master's degree from the University of Toledo, neither of which was true. Editors at the *Post*, however, were so impressed by these credentials that the usual reference check was "done in a cursory manner" (Green, 1981a, p. 12)..” Tom Wilkinson, the *Post*'s assistant managing editor for personnel at the time, vaguely remembered only calling someone at the *Toledo Blade*, Cooke's former employer. Months later when applying for the Pulitzer, Cooke would further inflate her credentials to include a stint at the Sorbonne. It was an AP reporter's friendly calls to Cooke's alleged alma maters that shed the first light on her deceptions.

“Reporters who come to the *Post* are usually over-achievers from other newspapers, where their identity and sense of value was intimately tied to their notoriety and success as a writer,” said Blaine Harden, a former Metro reporter now with the *Washington Post Magazine*, in ombudsman Bill Green's post-hoax report. “Upon taking a job at the *Post*, however,” Harden continued, “reporters are stripped of their identity and forced to re-create themselves for a new set of editors and readers” (Green, 1981d, p. A15). ” The paper's eagerness to shape, and in a sense even own, the careers of these young over-achievers apparently out stripped their need to verify that those achievements were, in fact, real. In terms of Foucault's thinking, Cooke's theoretical “new” identity was not one determined by the *Post*'s editors and readers as Harden said. Instead she adapted her identity to the environment in which she was placed. She carefully determined what the *Post* was looking for and became that entity. In most cases her identity was as fabricated as Jimmy's drug-riddled environment.

A generation later, Blair allowed the *Times* to believe that he had graduated from the University of Maryland when in fact he had left with a year of courses ahead of him. No one checked. Inquiries about an earlier internship at the *Boston Globe* and a stint on the University of Maryland paper were done with a light touch, if at all. Only investigations following the *Times*' revelation of Blair's fabrications turned up his troubled past (“*Times Reporter*”, p. 20).

Perhaps the editor most torn by Cooke's story of the 8-year-old heroin addict she named ‘Jimmy’ was assistant city editor Milton Coleman, who closely oversaw the story's production. Ombudsman Bill Green described him as a tall, rangy man with a quietness that hides a highly competitive nature. “Much of my attention was concentrated on the story and formulating it,” Coleman later told Bill Green. In fact, he wanted it to “read like John Coltrane's music. Strong. It was a great story.... Subconsciously, I think I firmly believed that the extra eyes of backup system would catch anything that I missed.” In fact, “[n]one of the *Post*'s senior editors

subjected Cooke's story to close questioning" (Green, 1981b, p. A12). Ben Bradlee, the *Post's* editor, read it and declared it "a helluva job" (p. A12).

On Sunday 28 September 1980, the *Post* printed 892,220 copies with "Jimmy's World" on the front page. The next day, the *Los Angeles Times-Washington Post* News Service moved the story to three hundred clients. Police and a large contingent of readers demanded to know the child's identity so that he could be rescued from the dangerous and squalid environment that Cooke had described. Doubts about the story's veracity surfaced almost immediately, but inside the paper's highly individualistic and competitive culture, management tamped them down. Later as editors tried to reconstruct their thinking, they talked about how their own doubts were overcome by the particular power of the story. They tended to attribute others' doubts to jealousy.

- David Maraniss, a deputy Metro editor, to whom Cooke would ultimately confess that she had made up 'Jimmy,' read the story on vacation. Something did not seem right, but he did not say anything for fear he would seem bitter. In November, as the *Post* prepared its Pulitzer nominations, Maraniss voiced his suspicions to Bob Woodward, Metro editor, but Woodward believed in the story and it was sent along.
- Milton Coleman's "funny feeling" surfaced during the week after publication when police failed to find the boy. Still, he too stuck by the story. He sent an eleven-person reporting team to cover the story's aftermath, pairing Cooke with a street-smart reporter Courtland Milloy. Milloy reported back that he and Cooke had searched for "Jimmy's" house for seven hours, and she was clearly unfamiliar with the neighborhood. Coleman thought Milloy was probably jealous, but he passed along his concerns to Woodward, the Metro editor, and Howard Simons, the managing editor. About three weeks after the story, Coleman told Cooke he wanted to find the boy. Cooke told him she had gone to the house and found that the family had moved to Baltimore. Later, Coleman erased questions in publisher Don Graham's mind by describing how mesmerized he had been with Cooke's account of her night with Jimmy. Graham was satisfied. Coleman lobbied for "Jimmy's World" to be the *Post's* nominee for the Pulitzer features category. "I can't think of another story that shows more enterprise and resourcefulness on the part of a reporter in overcoming obstacles," he said in a memo to Woodward (Green, 1981e, p. A14).
- Bob Woodward, Metro editor, read the story a week before it came out and loved it. "In a way," he later said, "both she and the story were almost too good to be

true. ...The story was so well written and tied together so well that my alarm bells simply didn't go off. My skepticism left me" (Green, 1981b, p. A12). When Coleman told him about Cooke and Milloy's seven-hour trip, his faith remained unshaken. The day after the story was published, Woodward promoted Cooke from the District Weekly to the Metro desk. He dismissed rumors around the newsroom about the story's veracity as "professional jealousy."

- Only Vivian Aplin-Brownlee, Cooke's boss on the District Weekly, was a lone Greek chorus of skepticism, continually expressing her doubts to a seemingly deaf group of editors. Never drawn in by Cooke's charm, Aplin-Brownlee told Coleman she did not believe the story a week after it appeared. She had seen Cooke reverse herself when challenged on points in other stories, she told him. Coleman sided with Cooke. After the Pulitzer Prize was announced, Aplin-Brownlee went to Coleman and said: "I hope she committed the perfect crime" (Green, 1981c, p. A13).."

Like Aplin-Brownlee, Jonathan Landman, Metro editor at the *New York Times* in 2000, continually sounded an alarm about Jayson Blair. After working with Blair for a year to cut down on his mistakes, Landman opposed the young intern's promotion to full-time reporter in January 2001. Although Landman accepted the *Times*' commitment to diversity, he sounded another alarm when Blair's mistakes got worse. "There's big trouble I want you both to be aware of," he said in a note to managing editor Gerald Boyd and William E. Schmidt, associate managing editor for news administration. Landman sent it with a copy of his sharply worded evaluation of Blair, noting that the young reporter's correction rate was "extraordinarily high by the standards of the paper" ("Times Reporter", p. 20).

After Blair took a two-week break for personal reasons, his inaccuracies soon returned. Landman fired a note to newsroom administrators: "We have to stop Jayson from writing for the Times. Right Now." Instead, Blair got another reprimand and another leave. Now, Landman assigned Jeanne Pinder, Blair's immediate supervisor to limit him to short articles, emphasize accuracy, and brook no nonsense. Blair's corrections plummeted and his assignments gradually grew, but he resented the short leash and lobbied to get out from under Landman's "tough love." Blair got his shift to the sports desk, and the sports editor got Landman's warning ("If you take Jayson, be careful"), Blair's brief work history, and his latest evaluation.

Shortly after his shift to sports, however, Blair's career shifted into fifth gear. He was quickly rerouted to the national desk to help cover the sniper case in his hometown of Washington, D.C., and intra-office concerns about his reliability failed to follow. "Nobody was

asking my opinion,” Landman said. Pinder’s offers to help went unheeded. Howell Raines, executive editor, wanted an eight-person team to blanket the sniper coverage; Blair knew his way around the area, and, as Raines later said, “This guy’s hungry.” Raines knew Blair’s problematic history. He later said that he believed Blair had learned his lessons over the summer (“Times Reporter”, p. 20-21).

Blair appeared to go into his new assignment jockeying for leaks and scoops among feuding law enforcement personnel and striving to impress his superiors, according to Nick Fox, who supervised him on the sniper coverage. After six days, he landed a front-page exclusive, based on five unnamed law enforcement officers. The story claimed that Maryland’s U.S. attorney, under pressure from the White House, had forced investigators to end their interrogation of John Muhammad, perhaps just as he was ready to confess. Denials poured in immediately, and even veteran law enforcement reporters in the *Times*’ Washington bureau raised an eyebrow. Later, Fox and national editor Jim Roberts said that these reactions would have drawn more concern if they had been told about Blair’s history of inaccuracy. Raines still saw no reason to alert Roberts to Blair’s earlier troubles. Instead, he congratulated Blair on his “great shoe leather reporting.” In fact, Roberts said his first warning about Blair’s record only came in January 2003 after he had filed a few more controversial sniper stories. Even then, the information just “got socked in the back of my head,” Roberts said, and he did not pass along the warning to Fox and others working directly with Blair (“Times Reporter”, p. 21).

The actions of editors in the Cooke and Blair cases (with the exceptions of Aplin-Brownlee and Landman) point to an organizational culture that can best be summed up as “a community of believers” (Eason, 1986, p. 429). Cooke and Blair were among fellow professionals and, for the most part, those professionals considered them reliable and ethical. Within any organizational culture, Frank Dubinskas (1992) writes, “... cultural patterns are often invisible to their own members, and it is the very obviousness of culture that sometimes hides it from analysis” (p. 187). In the cases of Cooke and Blair, the rumblings of doubt were present, and, in the cases of Aplin-Brownlee and Landman, that doubt was strongly expressed at times. Nevertheless, no action was taken. To the parties in an organizational setting, familiar cultural patterns simply constitute the ‘natural’ way to do things. “Each group’s particular way of working and understanding their work,” Dubinskas continues, “becomes normalized and turned into a sort of commonsense backdrop to everyday life” (p. 188).

Once both perpetrators had been accepted into their respective organizations, they apparently sized up the holes in the journalistic gatekeeping system and gambled that they could sneak through (Isaacs, 1986, p. 64).

2. *Whether or not to check anonymous sources*

When Cooke first mentioned that she had heard about an 8-year-old heroin addict, Milton Coleman, a normally cautious man who headed the *Post's* city desk, said: "Go after it. It's a front-page story" (Green, 1981b, p. A12). From then on, Coleman, who directly supervised the Cooke on the "Jimmy" story, placed a blind faith in both Cooke and her powerful story. Cooke fed Coleman tales about her progress. She was worried, she told Coleman, that a man she identified as the mother's boyfriend had threatened her with a knife if police got any word about what she witnessed. Coleman and the *Post* took the threats seriously. Howard Simons, the *Post's* managing editor, told Coleman to get Cooke to tell him the child's identity, but "I don't want to know," he added half joking (Green, 1981b, p. A12). In long memo based on her notes, Cooke gave details of Jimmy's clothes and the furniture in his house; she referred to the boy as "Tyrone" and mentioned his elementary school. Nothing in the account raised any suspicions for Coleman; neither he nor any other editor asked for more information.

Coleman checked Cooke's account of how the liquid ebbed out of the syringe, is replaced by blood and then re-injected, and Cooke's descriptive language squelched any other doubts. While other editors may have assumed Coleman knew who Cooke's anonymous sources were, in fact he had never asked her. Bob Woodward later said: "We went into our Watergate mode: protect the source and back the reporter" (Green, 1981c, p. A13). During Watergate, however, the famous reporter pair of Woodward and Carl Bernstein had always kept Ben Bradlee, the *Post's* executive editor, informed, even about the identity of their most secret source: Deep Throat. During the investigation, Bradlee was satisfied to know Deep Throat only "... by job, experience, access, and expertise." He writes in his biography: "That amazes me now, given the high stakes. I don't see how I settled for that, and I would not settle for that now" (Bradlee, 1996, p.: 365). Eventually Bradlee did learn Deep Throat's name. It was after Nixon's resignation and after Woodward and Bernstein's published their second book, *The Final Days*. But neither Katharine Graham, nor Don Graham, who succeeded his mother as publisher of the *Post* in 1979, ever knew Deep Throat's identity (Graham, 1997).

Despite the hard-won lesson of Cooke in 1981, no editor in *New York Times's* Washington bureau or national desk questioned Blair about his anonymous sources for front-page story that claimed the Maryland U.S. Attorney had been pressured by the White House to halt the Muhammad interrogations. Nick Fox, Blair's immediate supervisor, later said: "If somebody had said, 'Watch out for this guy,' I would have questioned everything that he did. I can't even imagine being comfortable with going with the story at all if I had known that the metro editors

flat out didn't trust him.'" ("Times Reporter", p. 21). But Raines and Boyd, who did know the history, also never asked Blair to identify his sources.

In December 2002, another of Blair's articles made the front page. Blair again cited unnamed law enforcement officials in explaining why "all the evidence" pointed to Muhammad's teenage accomplice, Lee Malvo, as the triggerman in the sniper shootings. Now Robert Horan Jr., Virginia's attorney in Fairfax County, called a press conference to denounce the claim. Boyd told Roberts to check it out, but Horan refused to identify what he considered wrong in the article on the grounds that it would compromise his investigation. Roberts said Horan only complained about leaks, not fabrications. Raines was satisfied that criticisms of both of Blair's articles had been properly handled. Roberts asked Blair to confirm that his sources were in a position to know what he had reported. No editor at the Times pressed Blair to identify his sources. The matter was dropped ("Times Reporter", p. 21).

"Though plenty of people have long felt anonymity is overused, if not abused, it's only become a more popular reporting tool through the years," Jill Rosen (2003) wrote in the August/September 2003 *American Journalism Review*. "Some think that if anything can temper the trend, Jayson Blair's shenanigans might be it" (p. 47). When revelations about Blair were published in the Times' own report in May 2003, John Temple, editor of the *Rocky Mountain News* was shocked enough to make a call to the *Times*. He got a *Times* spokeswoman who told him "that the paper's anonymous source policy was essentially that it didn't have one" (p. 47). Temple was indignant. His own policies were strict. All anonymous material was checked and double-checked at his and many smaller papers. He decided to stop running *Times*' stories with anonymous sources. Deborah Howell, who runs Newhouse News Service's Washington bureau, had a similar reaction. "You can hide a source from readers, but you don't hide a source from me" (p. 49).

3. Whether or not to turn a blind eye to fabrications, plagiarism, and other shenanigans

On 29 September 1980, the day after "Jimmy's World" appeared, Washington Police Chief Burtell Jefferson launched a city-wide search for the boy addict whom Cooke had described. After 17 days of intense search, Mayor Marion Barry called off the search. He said city officials thought the boy was a creation or a composite of more than one child. Bradlee was worried, but his staff assured him that the information still stood. Reporters with doubts about the story discussed their skepticism among themselves, Green wrote. Some did express their suspicions to editors who were not listening.

At the same time Jayson Blair was filing his flamboyant ‘scopes’ on the sniper story, he also was filing inadequate and fraudulent expense reports. Managers signed off on reports that claimed Blair was in the Washington area, but these were accompanied by New York receipts: for blankets from a Marshall’s department store in Brooklyn; food and drink from a Brooklyn Starbucks; and dinners at restaurants in Brooklyn and in Manhattan. If discrepancies were noticed, none was reported (“Times Reporter”, p. 21).

In March 2003, Blair’s stories contained lies about being at the home of a soldier’s parents in Hunt Valley, MD, a court hearing in Virginia, and a police chief’s home in Maryland. No source complained. By the end of the month, he had gotten bolder. He files a story on 27 March with a Palestine, WV, dateline. The family of Private Jessica D. Lynch was amused when they read that Lynch’s father, Gregory Lynch Sr., “choked up as he stood on his porch here overlooking the tobacco field and cattle pastures” (“Times Reporter”, p. 21). The Lynch’s home is in a valley with no tobacco or cows in sight. The story also said that the Lynch family had a long history of military service; it does not. It said Lynch’s brother was in the West Virginia National Guard; he was in the Army. The family laughed about the errors but dismissed them as if they were to be expected. “We just figured it was going to be a one-time thing,” Jessica’s sister Brandi said (“Times Reporter” p. 21). They made no complaint. Glenda Nelson, a source from Marmet, WV, quoted by Blair, said she never spoke to him. “The New York Times,” she later said. “You would expect more out of that” (“Times Reporter”, p. 20).

In April, Blair pretended to attend a soldier’s funeral in Cleveland. Neither the photographer who could never find him there nor the reporters whose quotes he apparently lifted verbatim from the *Washington Post* and elsewhere complained (“Times Reporter”, p. 20).

Later that month, Blair’s story about two wounded Marines in the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda was “as false as it was riveting,” according to the *Times*’ report on the hoax. Blair apparently made up quotes and stories that he attributed to Lance Corporal James Klingel to whom he only spoke to by telephone. He also lifted material from other news reports, including descriptions very similar to those used in the *Washington Post*. Blair quoted a Sergeant Eric Alva who never spoke to him and who was no longer in the hospital when Blair said he was Klingel’s roommate. The *New York Times* heard no complaints (“Times Reporter”, p. 20).

The possible explanations are disturbing. After the *Times*’ revelations about Blair, an “Associated Press Managing Editors’ survey found that many readers, even if they spotted an error, wouldn’t call it in [to the newspaper] because they think journalists don’t care. Worse yet, some of them think that the mistakes are done purposefully for embellishment” (Rosen, 2003, p. 48). If journalism’s mission is invested in the public, the public doesn’t get it. “Readers already

suspect papers of making things up and being sensational and of cutting corners, “ said Diane Tennant, managing editor at the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, “and so it’s our job to reinforce to our readers [what we do], making our processes transparent” (p. 51).

Finally at the end of April, one of the victims of Blair’s plagiarism stepped forward. Blair was called into the newsroom to answer accusations by the San Antonio *Express-News* about an article he claimed to have written from Los Fresnos, TX. The story was about the anguish of a missing soldier’s mother. As Cooke had, Blair produced his notes and stuck to his story for a while, but in time he folded. The four-year caper was over (“Times Reporter”, p. 21).

Why did it take so long? Perhaps the plagiarism went un-noticed. Perhaps cognitive dissonance blinded the reporters whose work Blair stole. After all, this was the *New York Times*.

The Potter Box of Ethical Decision Making

Dr. Ralph Potter of Harvard University designed the Potter Box as a guide for making and examining ethical decisions. As Potter dissected the process, the decision maker first defines the main question at work in the situation. In this case, we assert that the definition of the situation is how journalists define the purpose of the story (Christians et al., 2005). What reporters and editors see as the reasons they report, write and edit stories affects everything they do.

Second, in the Box’s counter clockwise path, the values at work reflect what the decision-maker finds most important in the situation. Third, the principle is the decision-maker’s governing ethical philosophy. In this case, we argue that the journalist’s working principle is reflected in his or her subjective definition of journalism’s teleology. Lastly, the decision-maker examines to whom she or he owes loyalties.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>1. DEFINITION</u></p> <p>This story is for...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. the citizens' welfare or better understanding B. the readers' entertainment C. a payoff 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>4. LOYALTIES</u></p> <p>I owe my allegiance to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. the readers/public B. the reporter; the organization C. the reporter; the organization
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>2. VALUES</u></p> <p>What is most important here is</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. the truth B. beating the competition; getting the best story C. looking good; winning 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>3. PRINCIPLE</u></p> <p>Our work is guided by the idea of journalism as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. a public trust B. the thrill of getting a good story C. a way to advance an individual's career; commercial success

All four boxes interact. How a decision maker defines the situation will affect what values he or she finds most important, for example. Generally, however, the third box—the principle—is viewed as the foundational one.

In the adaptation of the Potter Box above, we have placed three variables, A, B, and C, in each box. We argue that variables A in all four boxes operate in sync, as do variables B and C. In other words, if the decision maker sees (in Box 3) that “Our work is guided by the ideas of journalism as (A) a public trust,” then that journalist will believe his or her loyalty is (A) to readers. This journalist will see the story’s purpose as (A) for “the citizens’ welfare or better understanding” in Box 1. He or she will also value (A) “truth and verification” in Box 2.

If the Principle changes to B, that is, the guiding principle of journalism becomes “the thrill of getting a good story,” then the purpose of the story becomes the “readers’ entertainment”; the value at work is beating the competition to the best story; and loyalties shift to the self and the one’s own news organization.

If the Principle becomes C, a way to advance the journalist’s career or to enhance the newspaper’s circulation or reputation, then the story is done for a payoff; looking good and winning are valued; and loyalties are again to the self and the organization, not the readers.

We argue here that the newspapers’ own accounts of what happened in the Cooke and Blair debacles repeatedly show that decision makers involved were blinded by journalism’s lesser values (i.e., Values B and C). In 1980, the dazzling “Jimmy’s World” story sped on to the front

page, leaving verification in the dust. When Bob Woodward first read Cooke's story, he loved it. "I was personally negligent," Woodward confessed. He called the reporter into his office and asked her to tell him the story. "She related it all in the most disarming way," he said later. "It was so personal, so dramatic, so hard in her tummy" (Green, 1981b, p. A12). Similarly, the power of Blair's descriptive narrative – "as false as it was riveting" ("Times Reporter", p. 20) – as well as his stunning ability to scoop the competition, repeatedly overshadowed his editors' skepticism, that motivator of verification.

Both the *Post's* and the *Times's* post-hoax accounts of their respective scandals make clear that the anchor of public trust no longer moored the ship. And when that principle slipped, the commitment to readers, the value of truth and verification, and the understanding of the story as a vehicle for citizen's welfare and better understanding did not hold. Even in the apologies, the newspapers focus on their own damage and embarrassment. Judy Mann in her 1981 editorial in the *Post* seemed to have some sense that the newspaper had let down the public. She described her cohorts' reverence for their job as something close to a religion. "We use different phrases to describe what we do, but we generally agree that our job is simply to tell people what is happening, to use the skills we have to obtain the truth...Ours is a business based on trust and it is a tribute to our own faith in the way newspapers work that we trusted an extraordinary story by a colleague." Yet that betrayal she describes seems to be internal to the *Post's* staff and to the profession, not external to the public. "The betrayal of our profession, the violation of truth, hurts professionally and it hurts personally" (Mann, 1981, pp. B1-3). Similarly, when the *Times* stated: "The widespread fabrication and plagiarism represent a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper," they appeared to be talking about their trust in the reporter ("Times Reporter", p. 1).

Organizational Culture and the Narrative Fidelity

Perhaps it is no accident that news organizations like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* are the ones to be victimized by frauds. In his review of Jayson Blair's book, *Burning Down My Master's House*, Nicholas Lemann (2004) points out that such established institutions "operate on trust, hire lots of ambitious young people who work under minimal supervision, and ask their employees to produce spectacular results" (pp. 136-40). The result for the institution is that they become highly vulnerable to the rogue employee.

These institutions share a common set of conditions. First, they are corporate news organizations, which David K. Demers (1998) defines according to a Weberian model, with a list of characteristics. These include: a hierarchical authority, lots of rules and regulations, and a high

degree of efficiency in decision-making. Second, the *Post* and the *Times* were each undergoing “a categorical shift in mission, which makes the safeguards that were invented for the old mission insufficient,” says Lemann (p. 140). (Here, Lemann uses “mission” to mean something more like “character” or “personality.”) Organizations undergoing such change, suggests Berquist (1993), are like liquids that contain elements of both stability and change, order and chaos. Employees can find the instability disquieting. They can resist it or try to beat the system. Third, the change concentrated authority at the top of the hierarchy and created a “star system” that rewarded the grand performance.

Dubinskas (1992) views these organizational cultures as “... a coherent pattern of understanding built from the reciprocal relationships among four focal components” (p. 190). These four components are, in summary: (a) knowledge or beliefs, i.e. the shared cognitive or conceptual understandings of what or how things are; (b) patterns of practice, i.e. both the models for doing and the model-guided, habituated actions of everyday practice; (c) tools and artifacts, i.e. the means and ends of practical action; and (d) patterns of affect that embody the compelling force of culturally appropriate models.

If Dubinskas’ model is applied to the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*, the second component, patterns of practice, clearly becomes problematic. Cooke and Blair were not entering the practice of journalism in good faith. The patterns of practice are, as Geertz (1973) suggests, models for acting in the world and for creating the social reality through a series of patterned actions. In the cases of Cooke and Blair, these patterns of practice were violated and replaced by their own determination to make a name for themselves. They did so in an organizational atmosphere that condoned, and even encouraged, such behavior.

The *Post* was redefining itself after Watergate. Bill Green, who served as the *Post* ombudsman during the “Jimmy’s World” period, thought that the newspaper’s Watergate glories had ushered in a drastic change in the newsroom. “These people, after all, are human beings and subject to the usual blandishments and compliments and reactions. They had seen themselves idealized in the movie ‘All The President’s Men,’ and I think there was a certain cockiness.... Understandably, as a matter of fact. But I think there was that feeling institutionally” (Bill Green, personal communication, March, 18, 1998).

Twenty-three years later, the *Times*, according to Lemann (2004), was moving away from hard news and closer to a magazine format, employing narrative techniques in stories. Howell Raines, whom Ken Auletta (2003) described as “either blithely arrogant or irrepressibly self-confident,” (pp. 48-71) created intense atmosphere at the *Times* when he took over as executive editor in 2001. “I knew I wanted to raise the competitive metabolism of the paper” (pp. 48-71).

But some of the staff found him autocratic, even bullying. He quoted Bear Bryant a lot. He made changes fast. He elevated the authority of the top editors and often bypassed department heads, working directly with writers and sometimes parachuting those he considered “stars” to cover stories. He was accused of playing favorites. He wanted writing that popped off the page. He wanted coverage that went wide and deep, and he wanted to be first. He wanted it all. Jack Shafer in *Slate* took little pity on Raines: “He waved bye-bye to or marginalized whatever reporters and editors wouldn’t hop to his command and divided the newsroom into *us* (Raines’ people) and *them* (everybody else)” (Shafer, 2003).

“Under the Raines regime,” Lemann said, “evidently, the newsroom was like an engine being revved up past the red line on the tachometer” (p. 140). Reporters got attention by producing “spectacular, colorful material.... With Blair in particular, you can imagine the case being made for him in editors’ meetings: he was a wildly energetic and fearless street reporter who would go anywhere and talk to anyone, and he could phone in his stuff to the desk where soberer heads could tame it. All of that produced both the temptation and the possibility of writing stories from the field that were too good to be true, but good enough for the front page” (p. 140). It also produced a heap load of resentment. At a mid-May staff meeting in the aftermath of the Blair scandal, the *Times*’ leadership heard an earful. “People feel less led than bullied,” one staff member commented (Robertson, 2003, p. 40).

As these news organizations went through change, the hierarchy got higher. By all accounts, showiness got the boss’s attention and the rewards that went with it. Cooke and Blair were ripe for these rarefied environments. Young and black, they also exuded confidence and blind ambition. Janet Cooke made herself conspicuous. “When she walked, she pranced,” Green wrote in 1981. “When she smiled, she dazzled. Her wardrobe seemed always new, impeccable and limitless” (Green, 1981a, p. A12). Jayson Blair was a sloppy dresser, but he always ready to charm the newsroom with a compliment that showed he had read way down into the recipient’s story (Robertson, 2003, p. 40).

In organizations thus centered on the individual and his or her performance and career, “special treatment” is the rule rather than the exception. In this light, any “special treatment” because of race may be subsumed under a larger and more sinister system of favoritism. Lemann says that Blair’s book unintentionally “creates the impression of an organization that endlessly forgives an unforgivable employee. It isn’t exactly clear why—distance isn’t Blair’s specialty—but it does seem too much of a stretch to say that it all happened because Blair is black. He was also charming, energetic, and a member of a race-transcendent type that was then in favor with management” (Lemann, 2004, p. 138). Lemann criticizes Blair, who was given several personal

leaves, for whining about the *Times*' unforgiving attitude toward him because he was not only a recovering drug addict but also a black one. "But even being given the opportunity to feel the subtle sting of one's bosses' unspoken disapproval for being a recovering addict sounds like a pretty good deal," he says (p. 138). Only Landman, the city editor who kept Blair on a very tight leash until he sprang the catch, seems to have tried to reconcile the *Times*' interest in the individual with its commitment to the larger public.

Mintzberg (1991) names two forces within organizations that can counteract one another: (1) the "strategic vision" or the ideology that pulls together; and (2) the efficiency, innovation and competition—or internal politics—that pull apart (p. 55). Attempts to balance these two forces affect development of the organization's ideology, especially when the organization is in flux, he says. Organizational ideologies, he notes, are built slowly and "patiently by committed leaders who establish compelling missions for their organizations, nurture them carefully, and care deeply about the people who make them work" (p. 64).

A clear mission, one that encourages a shared purpose and transcends the individual is vital to a healthy workplace, according to Catherine Manegold, who teaches journalism at Emory University. "When you lose a sense of mission, it becomes more about careerism and getting your name out front," says Manegold, who was a reporter at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. "You start to have a toxic environment.... If you tolerate a kind of dog-eat-dog culture in the newsroom, then that culture's going to grow." Leadership needs to "choke it back" (Robertson, 2003, p. 39).

In this "toxic environment," journalists see the world outside—where the readers live and stories take shape—as existing only to feed their needs inside the newsroom. The juicy story and the prize-winning scoop get the editor's attention, and that attention fuels their career surge. Somewhere, barely audible in the background, the principle of the public trust plays its familiar tune. But it is taken as seriously as elevator music.

Applying Fisher's narrative paradigm, we see that upholding the public trust is a story that possesses high narrative fidelity because it stands the test of widely shared stories told about the profession's proudest moments. Watergate is a perfect example. Although the Nixon administration hated the investigation (for obvious reasons), the *Post* was acting as a watchdog for democracy. The average person had neither the time nor the resources to undertake his or her own investigation. The *Post* acted on their behalf. The reporters' aggressive, and sometimes unconventional, practices on this story were always firmly anchored in the public trust and the mission of righting misuses of power.

Conversely, the fabrications of Cooke and Blair suggest actions that ignore narrative fidelity. Neither perpetrator weighed the consequences of her or his stories. Neither their actions nor their words indicate any concern for readers. Cooke and Blair merely wrote for whatever personal gain the stories could provide. More significant to this paper is the role the *Post* and the *Times* played as news organizations. Each articulated a primary concern for the competitive value of the stories in question. These stories meant immediate gains in terms of beating the rivals and winning awards. Their fidelity to the *entelechy* of journalism, however, was not considered.

Analysis & Conclusion

When the Janet Cooke and Jayson Blair cases are measured against the mission of journalism, it is easy to see why—not just how—liars so easily slither into the profession’s most hallowed halls. And they do so with increasing impunity. When she resigned from the *Post*, Cooke hung her head and apologized: “. . . to my newspaper, my profession, the Pulitzer board and all the seekers of the truth. Today, in facing up to the truth, I have submitted my resignation. Janet Cooke” (Green, 1981f, A14). Twenty-three years later, Blair showed no such humility. He bragged and wrote a self-pitying book. Whereas Cooke wrote one story, Blair wrote many over several years, some of which dealt with major national news events.

Now it seems liars are popping up like crab grass:

- Ruth Shalit at the *New Republic* cribbed and plagiarized repeatedly after being busted in public several times.
- Christopher Newton was fired from AP in fall 2002 after it was learned that he invented sources and quotation in at least 40 stories.
- Stephen Glass at the *New Republic* was found to be an extraordinarily skillful liar.
- Jack Kelly, *USAToday*, got away with fabrications for years despite repeated complaints to the paper.

Critiquing the blur and interplay between fake news shows like “The Daily Show” and real ones such as “Hardball,” Frank Rich laments that: “At such absurd moments, and they are countless these days in our 24/7 information miasma, real journalism and its evil twin merge into a mind-bending mutant that would defy a polygraph’s ability to sort out the lies from the truth.” As the Bush administration passes off actresses as real television reporters, Rich reports, “Comedy Central” is wondering if it will be able to keep up with these new standards of fake news. But the joke may be on journalism. “The more real journalism declines,” Rich writes, “the

easier it is for such government infoganda to fill the vacuum. . . . Real journalism may be reeling, but faux journalism rocks” (Rich, 2004, sec. 2: 21).

Is there a solution? Alex S. Jones, a former *Times* reporter and author of *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times*, suggests that the newspaper spot check news articles after publication (“Times Reporter”, p. 21). Nicholas Lemann endorses the idea, saying: “[E]stablish a guerilla team of fact checkers who perform random pre-publication reviews of a small percentage of stories” (Lemann, 2004, p. 140). The kind of story that causes problems is easy to spot, he adds: it is a vivid feature from an exotic location. An 8-year-old heroin addict shooting up in the darkest regions of Washington or the mother of a missing soldier anguishing in Los Fresnos, TX, would serve as two good examples. Perhaps such fact checking could work. The *Chicago Tribune* took scatter-shot aim at pesky copyediting errors by hiring an outside agency to spot-check the paper after publication. The staff growled but the error-rate dropped dramatically.

After the Jayson Blair scandal, both the *Times* and the *Post* did take corrective measures. The *New York Times* hired a public editor, Daniel Okrent, as an ombudsman to its readers and, in 2003, asked Allan M. Siegal to serve as a standards editor and handle concerns the staff raised about reporting and editing practices. In May 2005, the *Times* announced that it would also adopt a set of recommendations from an internal committee appointed to help the paper’s improve credibility. The committee suggested, for example: making its staff more easily accessible through e-mail; using the paper’s Web site to provide readers with background materials and interview transcripts; curtailing use of anonymous sources; encouraging reporters “to confirm the accuracy of articles with sources before publication and to solícite feedback from sources after publication”; setting up “error tracking systems”: and encouraging the development of software to detect plagiarism” (Seelye, 2005, p. C6).

In 2004, the *Post* published a detailed policy on “sources, quotations, attribution, and datelines.” It cautioned that “granting anonymity to a source should not be done causally or automatically” and that “[e]ditors have an obligation to know [their] identity.” And in a careful delineation of rules about attribution, it said: “If a reporter was not present at the scene described in a story, the story should make that clear” (Washington Post, 2004).

Such correctives, however, will only work in the long run if they are instituted as part of a larger commitment to journalism’s mission. At the center of these fabrications, the real culprit is in the decision-making systems of the respective newspapers. Janet Cooke and Jayson Blair are easy targets for ridicule, but what about the gatekeeping system at America’s newspapers? Based on the evidence presented in this paper, the motivation, at least in the case of Cooke and Blair,

appears to have been focused on getting the big story, winning awards, and beating the competition, not on reporting and presenting news in a way that earns the public's trust. The discipline of verification — like the commitment to truth and loyalty to citizens — must be sustained by a clear and ongoing articulation of the purpose behind them.

To borrow from Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), a journalist's participation in the practice of his or her craft can never be virtuous if external goods like fame or money motivate it. The virtuous journalist must submit to the discipline, rules, and traditions of the practice in order to work toward its ultimate reason for being: public service. The practice of journalism is an ongoing narrative that precedes and post-dates the participation of any given reporter or editor. The newly minted journalist steps into the ongoing narrative. It is not the story of his or her career, but the story of the practice and discipline of journalism itself.

In 1997, Bill Green believed that the news media had righted their courses after the Janet Cooke hoax, in part because of the steps the *Post* took to inform the public. "I'd like to think there is a little more feeling of skepticism by editors on what copy crosses their desks," Green said. "But maybe I'm just being nostalgic" (Bill Green, personal communication, March 18, 1998).

After all, Bradlee had said in 1981, Cooke was a "one-in-a-million liar" (Green, 1981d, p. A15). It seems in retrospect that he underestimated the odds. Twenty-three years later, technology makes plagiarism and fabrication much easier to do and to detect. And the fabricators keep popping up like arcade-game gophers that have to be beaten down by mallet-wielding ombudsmen. Reflections on Blair sound less naïve. "God is not going to stop making charismatic maniacs," Lemann (2004) says sagely, "so it falls to newspapers to figure out how to do a better job of apprehending them" (p. 140). And, we might add, preventing them.

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