

## Jayson Blair

**TRANSGRESSIONS** The *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair ripped off material from other newspapers and from



wire services, fabricated quotes, and used phony datelines, often in high-profile reports including the 2002 D.C.-area sniper shootings, the Jessica Lynch saga, and stories about missing soldiers in Iraq.

**CONSEQUENCES** Blair resigned his post at the *Times* and on May 11, 2003, the *Times* ran a 7,239-word front-page story that illuminated problems in at least thirty-six of the seventy-three articles Blair had written since October 2002, calling his fabrica-

tion and plagiarism “a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper.”

**UPSHOT** The public censure of the *Times* because of the Blair debacle catalyzed a period of significant reform at the nation’s paper of record. A newsroom revolt forced the resignation of the paper’s executive and managing editors, Howell Raines and the late Gerald Boyd, and an internal committee headed by the longtime *Times*man Allan Siegal resulted in a ninety-five-page report of recommendations for the *Times*’s new executive editor, Bill Keller.

**WRINKLE** In his memoir and in subsequent interviews, Blair has attributed his downfall, at least in part, to his undiagnosed bipolar disorder. He says that his subsequent involvement with bipolar support groups has helped him understand what happened.

**LATEST** In the intervening years, Blair has slipped into a quieter life at his parents’ home in Virginia and focused on managing his bipolar

disorder. At thirty, Blair splits his time between operating a business “importing and exporting books” and running peer-to-peer support groups for people with bipolar disorder in his community. He blipped briefly back on the radar in 2004 with the publication of his memoir, *Burning Down My Master’s House*, and again in 2005 for his brief tenure as book editor of *The Karasik Conspiracy*, a fictional thriller about terrorists poisoning the prescription-drug supply from Canada.

**LAST WORD** Blair says the skills that he learned as a journalist help him in his work with victims of bipolar disease. “I’ve been to hospitalizations with people and they aren’t being treated well and their family has been trying and trying to get a response. But as reporter, I know what buttons to push to see results.” —Irene Jay Liu and C. Onur Ant

---

*The authors are students in SHEILA CORONEL’s investigative reporting class at Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism. Coronel is the director of the Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism at the school. Claude Poux, a member of the class, helped edit the article.*

After four years, the name Jayson Blair remains ubiquitous in journalism. Blair's deception, which sent *The New York Times* into a tailspin, has become a cautionary tale taught in journalism schools and cited in newsrooms. While the scandal received an unprecedented amount of publicity, and Blair, a certain degree of infamy, it is not unlike the others in this series: a story about one reporter's ethical lapse, and the newsroom that failed to protect against it.

On May 11, 2003, *The New York Times* ran a 7,239-word front-page story entitled, "Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception," that detailed a litany of errors, fabrications, and plagiarism committed by Jayson Blair during his tenure at the paper. Blair, who was 27 at the time of his public exposure, had started out as an intern in the summer of 1998, working his way up to full-time reporter by 2000. Despite numerous warning signs, *The Times* allowed Blair to continue writing for the paper, assigning him to cover high-profile stories such as the 2002 DC-area sniper shootings, Jessica Lynch, and missing soldiers in Iraq. In its May 11<sup>th</sup> story, *The Times* revealed problems in at least 36 of the 76 articles Blair wrote from beginning October 2002, calling the fabrication and plagiarism "a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper."

In the intervening years, Blair has slipped into a quieter life at his parents' home in Centreville, Virginia, focused on managing the bipolar disorder that he says contributed to his downfall at *The Times*. He blipped briefly back on the radar in 2004 with the publication of his memoir, *Burning Down My Master's House*, and again in 2005 for his brief tenure as book editor of *The Karasik Conspiracy*, a fictional thriller about terrorists poisoning the drug supply from Canada, commissioned by the Pharmaceutical Research Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) to ignite public fears about importing drugs from overseas.

At 30, Blair splits his time between operating a business "importing and exporting books" and running peer-to-peer support groups for individuals with bipolar disorder in his community. When pressed for details about his book business in a phone interview, Blair demurs, saying, "The people who I work with, would probably, not probably, definitely, not want to be associated with me because of what happened."

In contrast, Blair is effusive when he talks about his work with the bipolar community. In his memoir and in subsequent interviews, Blair has attributed his downfall, at least in part, to his suffering from undiagnosed bipolar disorder. He says that the support groups helped him to understand what happened to him at *The Times*. "It was hard to accept until I saw other people and heard about their job situations and I understood that it was the exact same thing. So nobody gave a damn. It is really nice. It is reassuring," he says. "You take out New York Times and you take out big scandal, something like this has happened for them at their job."

Blair sees himself as a leader in the bipolar community. He says that the skills that he learned as a journalist help him in his work now. "I've been to hospitalizations with people and they aren't being treated well and their family has been trying and trying to get response. But as reporter, I know what buttons to push to see results." Blair says he feels that he owes it to the world to serve, but not necessarily for his past misdeeds. "Is it penance? I'm not offended by the question. You know, I haven't figured out the penance part of it. I gravitated towards helping people; that is why I got into journalism."

Blair continues to struggle with his illness. He says that he was hospitalized this past December for the bipolar disorder. His public relations consultant, Ted Faraone, confirmed his hospitalization. He was pursuing coursework to finish his Bachelor's degree, but says that he is taking time off because of the hospitalization. Blair emphasizes that he chooses to live with his parents. "It's not a matter of me not being able to financial support myself. I can, but I choose not to leave. I wouldn't choose to live on my own right now. I don't trust myself to live on my own right now."

For the moment, Blair is generally content with his circumstances. "I'm cruising right now," he says. "For the most part, I like my life the way it is. I mean, I'll want more, do you know what I mean? There's gonna be more that I want to be."

Does that mean a return to journalism? "No, although I love it," says Blair. "I love the fast-track, I love the power. I don't think that I was born to handle it that way. I don't think that I'm the right man for that job. I'm better in small doses. In a weird way, I was always ill-suited for that beast. Newspapers are very powerful. Journalism is very powerful. And I'm a person with a big hole in his heart, trying to fill it. And I was trying to fit a beast. A square peg in a round hole. I think that I'm closer to filling it now."