

Program Title	A Fragile Trust: Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at the New York Times
Program Subject(s)	Journalism; Ethics; Mass Media; Race Relations; Bipolar Disorder
Year Produced	2014
Directed by	Samantha Grant
Produced by	Samantha Grant; Brittney Shepherd
Distributed by	Bullfrog Films, PO Box 149, Oley, PA 19547
Reviewed by	Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Running Time	75 minutes / 57 minutes
Color or B&W	Color
Awards Received	Best Documentary Award, Macon Film Festival; Alliance of Women Film Journalists EDA Award, Salem Film Fest
Audience Level	College – General Adult
Review	

A Fragile Trust: Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at the New York Times tells the story of, as the DVD cover calls him, “the most infamous serial plagiarist of our time.” Over approximately a two year period as a *New York Times* reporter, Jayson Blair falsified or plagiarized dozens of stories, copying pieces of journalism by peers around the country, claiming to have visited places he never went and to have interviewed sources he never met. The result was Blair’s firing and public disgrace in May 2003 and a “black eye” for the world’s greatest newspaper, though, as the film tells it, neither seem to have had any serious lasting effects. The *New York Times* is still the *New York Times*, and Blair has converted his infamy into a second career as an author, speaker, and “life coach” (yes, really). The result is a film which, while providing an engaging look into the mind of an obviously disturbed individual and into the pressure-cooker environment of the *New York Times* newsroom in the early 2000s, seems to be lacking in any sense of long-term impact. The film tells us what happened, via interviews with Blair’s peers and superiors at the *New York Times*, excerpts from the audiobook of his 2004 memoir, *Burning Down My Master’s House: My Life at the New York Times*, and interviews with Blair himself, but it doesn’t show us why we should care.

The film opens with *San Antonio Express News* reporter Macarena Hernandez, whose 2003 story on a soldier missing in Iraq was copied nearly verbatim by Blair. While Blair usually copied pieces from multiple sources, blending them together to evade detection, he admits in retrospect that he “got sloppy” and copied too much from Hernandez’s piece. *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz picked up on the similarity and published a short article about it, and Hernandez’s editor wrote to Blair’s editors at the *New York Times* to complain. Blair himself called Hernandez after the story was published to apologize, claiming that he must have read her piece and copied it without intending to do so, but she knew almost immediately from mistakes in the story (most notably, that Blair claimed to have spoken to the soldier’s mother via a Spanish translator, even though the woman spoke English) that Blair was lying and had never been to Los Fresnos, Texas, to interview the sources as he claimed. That incident, taken together with other problems in Blair’s reporting dating back to the DC Sniper case the previous autumn, led to a confrontation between the reporter and his editors at the *New York Times* and to his rapid resignation when it became clear he was going to be fired.

From there the film back-tracks to Blair’s childhood in order to tell his story chronologically. As it does, several interlocking narratives emerge. First is the rise and fall of Blair himself, a talented

writer but insecure person, and the characteristics which led to his deception. From a middle class family in Columbia, Maryland, but “clearly a climber,” in the recollection of one *Times* editor, Blair says he was drawn to journalism for the chance to help others, to “educate, entertain, [and] make lives better.” He attended the University of Maryland before earning an internship in a *Times* program intended to diversify the paper’s staff; there his writing developed rapidly but so did some problematic personal traits, including (according to Blair) bipolar disorder and dual addictions to alcohol and cocaine. One of the interesting, but frustrating, aspects of the film is its inability to get an accurate read on Blair; In interviews he is regretful but never believably apologetic, and in the film’s opening interview he states, “there isn’t one simple answer” to what happened or why he plagiarized and falsified his stories. To Howell Raines, Executive Editor of the *Times* between 2001 and 2003, Blair was a “disturbed individual who... exhibit[ed] sociopathic behavior,” including a manipulative personality and a lack of empathy.

Howell Raines’ leadership at the *New York Times* during a critical point in the paper’s history is the film’s second major narrative. Raines took over as Executive Editor on September 6, 2001 with a mandate to drag the *New York Times* into the Internet age. With both revenues and “market demand for quality journalism” in decline, making the *Times* economically viable, to Raines, meant cutting print journalism expenditures while relentlessly pushing his reporters to produce more and better work. The film describes the environment he and Managing Editor Gerald Boyd created as autocratic, high stakes, and high stress. Their approach seemed to be vindicated following the events of September 11, 2001, when the *Times*’ coverage of the terror attacks and the U.S. “War on Terror” resulted in seven Pulitzer Prizes. Blair, however, at least partially blames the newsroom environment for his actions, even though *Times* investigations found fabrications – “excessive deceit for no real apparent purpose” – in his work dating all the way back to his high school newspaper. Regardless, the Blair scandal, and Raines and Boyd’s mismanagement of its aftermath, ended both men’s careers at the *New York Times*. Raines resigned to write a memoir and occasional op-eds; Boyd died of lung cancer in 2006.

The film picks up and briefly examines other issues and narratives as well, including changing journalism in the digital age and the racialized coverage of Blair’s case. One editor describes Blair’s deception as a “tragedy of the electronic age,” since he was able to use the Internet (including a hacker’s “back door” into the *Times*’ photo archive,) to write convincingly about places he had never visited. Race became an issue in reporting on the story when it became known that Blair had gotten his internship through a diversity program. Suddenly, his fall was proof of the “failure of affirmative action.” (Correspondent Lena Williams emphatically points out: “It became a story about race because it was a black reporter... A black person cannot be involved in *anything* without it being about race.”)

Ultimately, *A Fragile Trust* is a well-made and engaging film about a tumultuous period in the history of both the *New York Times* and American journalism. As such, it should be of interest to journalism students, scholars, and practitioners. (Blair’s story is also recounted in fascinating detail in an article, “[Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves a Long Trail of Deception](#),” published in the *New York Times* in the wake of his resignation. Students and scholars with a serious interest in Jayson Blair should start with that piece, and use this film as supplemental material.) Unfortunately, the story is so closely tied to Blair’s personality and personal failings that any broader implications are difficult to discern; more than anything it seems to be the story of one troubled, dishonest man, not a criticism of the *New York Times* or an indictment of a profession.

Note: The DVD contains both a 75-minute theatrical version and a 57-minute classroom version. This review refers to the content of the theatrical version.

Reviewer Rating

Recommended