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THE SHREDDING OF MEDIA CREDIBILITY

Official journalism in America is still reeling this morning as the mighty New York Times continues genuflecting on the significance of its admission that it has been carrying all the fiction fit to print. Times watchers on the right are ecstatic about the gray lady's bloody news, the revelation that one of its reporters, Jayson Blair, had been making it up and phoning it in, freely borrowing from other media outlets and not covering stories that he was writing about.

RACE BAITING ON MSNBC

DON IMUS this morning chortled about the Times "Blair Witch Project" although one of his gang of wide-guy acolytes couldn't resist banging on the race card to blame it all on diversity gone bad, since Blair is black. The New York Post calls Blair the "Times trickster" and reports that he is now in the hospital with personal problems. No doubt affected by the ton of bricks that fell on him yesterday when the newspaper of record devoted SEVEN THOUSAND words to his disgrace and their shame,

This is the latest in a growing round of media scandals. Alex Jones, the director of a Harvard Center on the press and the author of a book on the Times, said on NBC that he believes there are Blair-type scandals lurking in every major newspaper. It was not just Blair that has been disgraced but the so-called system of checks and balances in place in the news room, according to Bob Steele

who teaches ethics at the Poynter Institute of Journalism.

DIVERSITY IS NOT ISSUE, SAYS MANAGING EDITOR

THE NEW YORK DAILY NEWS quotes managing editor Gerald Boyd on the race baiting that seems to be surfacing (or lurking just beneath the surface.) "Boyd bristled when asked if Blair, who is black, figured in a bid by The Times to diversify its mostly white staff of national correspondents, saying, "It's not an issue about diversity, but about a reporter who had issues that allowed him to deceive." Blair, who apologized in a letter to Boyd and executive editor Howell Raines for a "lapse in journalistic integrity" and said he was "seeking appropriate counseling," did not return a call to his cell phone yesterday.

"He vacated his last registered address – an apartment in Brooklyn – several months ago, leaving behind what was described as structural damage and extensive filth that cost several thousand dollars to undo." Clearly, Blair had problems. Painful.

MEA MEA CULPAS

IN all of my years as a NY Times reader and media watcher, I have never seen the newspaper of record go into such overdrive to protest its innocence and "correct" the errors of a single journalist. Four and half pages were devoted to Times reputation management in Sunday's paper, which

devoted a two-column front page story, an editor's notes and acres of print on the inside to tracking down and exposing the lies of young Jayson Blair, 27, who is said to have filed misleading reports 36 times (out of 76 stories) since getting national reporting assignments,

Editors apparently urged that he be fired, but nothing was done. "It's Janet Cooke all over again," said my downstairs neighbor" who compared this to the incident at the Washington Post where another young journalist who happened to be black was exposed for filing contrived or invented stories. He [Blair] was one of those "affirmative action" hires, my neighbor sneered. And so race raises its ugly head close to home.

Why did the Times go so over the top beating its breast on this story? Embarrassment, no doubt, especially since Editor Howell Raines was recently being targeted by the NY Post and Fox News Channel for reports critical of the war. Also, perhaps because the mighty media elite was exposed in this instance by the City Paper, a lowly alternative paper in Washington.

Says the Times about its massive investigation: "The newspaper organized it in the belief that the appropriate corrective for flawed journalism is better journalism – accurate journalism."

Oh really?

In an editor's note the paper does a mea culpa of historic proportions, regretting its failure to detect the "journalistic deceptions" earlier and apologized to its readers, to those whose work was "purloined" and to all conscientious journalists whose professional trust has been betrayed by this episode.

Catch your breath Danny. I can't believe I am reading this. I would like to think of myself as conscientious, but I must say there is something

smarmy about this since it does not reveal what the newspaper's "separate internal" inquiry has found. (This suggest that some heads will roll.) For years scholars of every description and leaning have been critiquing Times coverage. Noam Chomsky has packed books with long lists of well footnoted errors and omissions. Tuli Kupferberg, the ex-Fug, once published an imaginary Editor's Note that apologized for the Times support for the cold war and American interventions for decades.

This apology is like Al Capone getting busted for not filing taxes. It is a misdemeanor in a sea of journalistic felonies. For more on the Times, see Daniel Forbes story on Mediachannel about Times reporter Judith Miller who, he reports, violated other Times guidelines limiting reporters involvement in groups lobbying on issues being covered. See: "Pulitzer Prize-Winning Reporter Crosses The New York Times' Line of 'Strict Neutrality.'"

MEDIA SYSTEM STRAINED

THE media system today is showing signs of the institutionalized corruption now associated with Wall Street firms. Last week CNN's Aaron Brown and Walter Cronkite pulled out of deals that would have put them in the position of endorsing pharmaceutical goods. Cronkite's office said he never did endorsements, so I don't want to tarnish him in any way here, BUT none of this is helping.

CONCERN IN JAPAN

AND, of course, the issue that others in the world see but that the American media has yet to confront, the way in which virtually the whole media caved in and became an accessory to the Bush White House in its war ion Iraq. This point was driven home to me today by a letter from a jour-

nalist at NHK in Japan, which is making a film on this – even if most US media institutions just move on. She raises precisely the types of questions that are being avoided:

“Today, I am writing to ask if you are planning any research, seminar, public discussion, or discussions with reporters or TV producers regarding how the US media covered the war in Iraq. Especially, concentrating on the subject of fairness in the reports. NHK is planning to produce a program on this subject and would like to see how the US media itself is evaluating the war coverage in Iraq.

We would also like to see if the reporters or producers are beginning to ask more tough questions like, “Was this war necessary?” “Was it legal for US to attack Iraq without international support?”

SWINTON'S SPEECH RECALLED

FINAL thought. I have been skimming Uri Dowbenkos' book called “BUSHWACKED: Inside stories of True Conspiracy,” published by conspiracy digest. Usually I avoid tracts like this but there was at least one relevant quote to pass on that relates to the New York Times, the subject of so much hand wringing today.

The remarks are attributed to John Swinton, former Chief of Staff for the Times, and according to this book, once dubbed “the dean of his profession.” He made these remarks before the New York Press Club early in the last century. (Perhaps a reader has more details.)

“There is no such thing as an independent press in America. You know it and I know it. There is not one of you who dares to write his honest opinion, and if you did, you know before hand it would never appear in print.

“The business of journalists is to destroy the truth; to lie outright; to pervert; to vilify, to fawn at the feet of the mammon and to sell his country and his race for the daily bread. You know it and I know and what folly this is – toasting an independent press. We are tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes; we are the marionettes. They pull the strings and we dance. Our time, our talent, our capacities are all property of these men. We are intellectual prostitutes.”

OTHER DEANS AT WORK

AND so was born the idea of media whores, This is strong stuff. As for the role of Deans, Dan Fost of the San Francisco Chronicle reports: “The deans of the nation's journalism schools, led by Orville Schell of UC Berkeley, are coming together in an effort to improve the quality of television news.

“The effort, launched last year, is getting some traction, as the Carnegie Corp. of New York – a major foundation that helped launch the Public Broadcasting System in 1967 – said it will consider helping.

“The bitter truth is most Americans get most of what they know about the world from broadcast news,” Schell said. “Whatever you think of broadcast or cable news, you'd have to say it's not as good as it could be.”

WHERE O WHERE CAN THE WEAPONS BE?

NOW back to the hunt, the hunt for Weapons of Mass Destruction, the issue that consumed hours and days of TV speculation and government assurances. Barton Gellman reported in the Washington Post yesterday: “The group directing all known U.S. search efforts for weapons of mass

destruction in Iraq is winding down operations without finding proof that President Saddam Hussein kept clandestine stocks of outlawed arms, according to participant.”

“Leaders of Task Force 75’s diverse staff – biologists, chemists, arms treaty enforcers, nuclear operators, computer and document experts, and special forces troops – arrived with high hopes of early success. They said they expected to find what Secretary of State Colin L. Powell described at the U.N. Security Council on Feb. 5 – hundreds of tons of biological and chemical agents, missiles and rockets to deliver the agents, and evidence of an ongoing program to build a nuclear bomb.

“Scores of fruitless missions broke that confidence, many task force members said in interviews. “

OBSERVER: “A PLATFORM OF LIES?”

OVER in England Paul Harris Martin Bright and Ed Helmore ask in the Observer, “Where are Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction? Was the war fought on a platform of lies? Taji was the only specific location singled out by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his address to the UN when he argued that evidence compiled by US intelligence proved the existence of an illegal weapons programme. ‘This is one of 65 such facilities in Iraq,’ Powell said. ‘We know this one has housed chemical weapons.’

“But The Observer has learnt that Taji has drawn a blank. US sources say no such weapons were found when a search party scoured the base in late April. By then it had already been looted by local villagers. If Taji ever had any secrets, they are

long gone. That is bad news for Britain and the United States. The pressure is building to find Saddam’s hidden arsenal and time is running out.

A major shakeup is occurring in US occupation plans. Jay Garner the general in plain clothes is out; Mr. Bremer, the counter-terrorism expert is in. And the country is festering. Tomdispatch notes, “Over a month after Saddam Hussein’s regime dissolved and his military was either destroyed or simply dissolved, the simplest aspects of life under the American occupation have not returned to anything like “normal,” and normal – that is, the normality that just preceded the war – was already teetering at the edge of catastrophic. Where to start? The phone system still doesn’t work; electricity isn’t yet up; people are out of work; potable water is often not available; stipends are not being paid; a population which relied heavily on state aid simply to get through the day has been largely abandoned; the only organized forces in parts of the country seem to be the Shia clergy; the Americans were so woe-folly unprepared for this occupation that, in many cases, they can hardly communicate with the Iraqis; hostility is widespread; small numbers of American troops are dying – and that’s just a beginning.”

CENSORSHIP THREATENS

AS the US tries to replace Iraqi broadcasting with its own shows, there is already talk of censoring a TV station in the new Iraq. US Lieutenant General Petraeus says he doesn’t like the content and is considering doing something about it. “Yes, what we are looking at is censorship, but you can censor something that is intended to inflame passions.”

