

## CASE STUDY

### Jayson Blair and *The New York Times*

On May 1, 2003, a young reporter named Jayson Blair resigned from *The New York Times*. Days earlier he was confronted by his editors with information they could no longer ignore. During his four years at the *Times*, Blair made up facts and quotations in many of his news stories and passed off the work of others as his own.

Blair had problems at the *Times* from the start. Editors and reporters expressed concerns to each other about the number of mistakes in Blair's stories. Six months before Blair's misdeeds were discovered, one editor wrote in a memo, "We have to stop Jayson from writing for the *Times*. Right now."

Jayson Blair did more than make up facts and quotations and steal the work of others. He also lied to his bosses about where he was. He lied about whom he talked with and what they said. He lied to colleagues with whom he was supposed to collaborate. In one instance, a *Times* photographer called Blair's cell phone 15 times in one day because the two of them needed to work together on an assignment in Washington, D.C. The photographer did reach Blair three times. However Blair was still in New York, so he made up excuses for why he couldn't meet with the photographer.

Some of Blair's editors and colleagues thought he was careless, sloppy and prone to errors in his writing. Some even suspected that he was making things up, and they told the editors in charge. Blair was told to improve and to concentrate on accuracy, but he was not monitored closely.

In October 2002, Blair was assigned to an important news story: A sniper was shooting random victims in Washington, D.C. Police from various local agencies were trying to track down the sniper. Blair soon produced articles with details and quotes that were suspicious because they sounded too good. They were. Later, it was discovered that Blair faked receipts on expense accounts so it would look like he was in cities like Washington, D.C., when he was not.

Blair's luck ran out when *The San Antonio Express-News* accused him of plagiarizing, or copying, a story it had run about a missing soldier's mom. The *Times* editor who confronted him asked Blair to look him in the face and tell him whether he had really interviewed the soldier's mom. Blair lied again.

In that and every other instance, Blair violated the most important principle of journalism. Truth. Blair didn't go to jail, nor was he sued, but he destroyed his career as well as the careers of several editors, including the top editor, who resigned within weeks. More important, Blair crippled the credibility of one of the country's most prestigious news-gathering operations.

#### **THINK Critically**

1. What might cause a reporter to make up stories the way Jayson Blair did?
2. Why is truth the most important principle of journalism?



Jayson Blair

#### **CASE STUDY**

Explain to students that people read or listen to the news to obtain facts, not a story of fiction. Ask them how they might feel if they read or heard a story they believed to be truthful, only to find out it was fiction.