

To Be Equal

Jayson Blair scandal: Big tale of two compulsions

By Lee A. Daniels
Special to Sentinel-Voice

For anyone who honestly believes that race is no longer a significant factor in the discourse about American life, the Jayson Blair scandal provides a much-needed education.

In the past two weeks Blair, a young African-American reporter for the *New York Times* who was once considered a rising star there, has been shown to be a deceiver of very high, or rather, low, order.

And, as the full extent of Blair's deception has become clearer and the story has mushroomed in the media, the discussion of it has come to be starkly framed in racial terms.

"Whether or not this is a scandal born of ambition, it is also being cast as a story about race," *Time* magazine's story this week declared. "As Blair's record came to light, some colleagues conclude that he got second-chances that others might not have."

Seth Mnookin, a *Newsweek* reporter who

wrote its story on the scandal, said on CNN's *Reliable Source* news program, "What the *Times* still needs to talk about is the real issue of whether (Blair) was pushed along because he is black."

Mnookin's comment came despite the *New York Times*' statement in a long story Sunday about Blair's misdeeds that he was not "coddled" because he was African-American.

William Safire, the *Times*' conservative columnist, wrote Monday that some of his "ideological soulmates" are chortling at the "affirmative-action angle (of the scandal)."

"See what happens, they taunt," wrote Safire of the jibes he had apparently heard, while making clear he disagreed with them "when you treat a minority employee with kid gloves, promoting him when he deserves to be fired? ... This is about diversity backfiring."

As one who spent nearly two decades reporting for the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* from the 1970s

to the 1990s, this gives me a racially-driven sense of, as Yogi Berra famously said, déjà vu all over again.

In one sense, that déjà vu is tied specifically to the infamous Janet Cooke scandal of the early 1980s, in which the *Washington Post* was forced to return a Pulitzer Prize after Cooke's story, "Jimmy's World," was found to have been a complete fabrication.

Then, as now, some number of whites were consumed with declaring that Cooke's sins were evidence of a racial flaw afflicting all African-American journalists and that her deceit proved there was a "problem" with affirmative action.

But, of course, that compulsion of declaring that the sins of one individual are really the sins of his or her "kind"—especially if the wrongdoer is black—is fun-

damental to racial bigotry and an old dynamic in American life. Jayson Blair's behavior is just the latest tripwire to reveal how potent it remains.

One can say that the sheer effrontery of Blair's deception is breathtaking—but only if one deliberately ignores other instances of fakery in journalism, and what we know all too well now about the personality of the con artist with respectable credentials.

Con artist, whether they play the three card monte trade on various streets in midtown Manhattan, or work in the seedy underworld, or play the more refined white-collar game in the world's high rent districts, are often unquestionably talented, and could succeed the legitimate way, if they were to put their minds to it.

But their psychological

"twist", or defect is to do it the unethical way, for the thrill of conning others, and, for some, to nourish a powerful self-destructive compulsion. Some con artists can discipline that impulse enough to keep working their high-wire act for years. From the *Times*' reporting of his behavior, Blair was not well disciplined at all.

Jayson Blair's story of deceit is hardly a new one in the world of mainstream American journalism.

Indeed, ironically, this very week Stephen Glass, once a high-flying young reporter for the *The New Republic*, the influential *Washington* periodical, who was fired five years ago—at age 25, two years younger than Blair is now—for fabricating a series of articles is back in the news.

Glass has written an auto-

biographical first novel about that scandal.

Neither then, when Glass was a Jayson Blair of his time, as it were, nor today has Glass' race been made a facet of the discussion about his wrongdoing.

But, then, Stephen Glass is white.

So, the Jayson Blair scandal is really a story of two compulsions.

The one compulsion is that of a personality type—the con artist—found in all human groups.

The other compulsion—racial bigotry—is found out in all human individuals, but in all modern human societies, and certainly in this one, and it is rarely for below the surface of the discourse.

I know which compulsion I'd declare the more dangerous to the well-being of all of us.

Blair

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this, it doesn't do our reputation any good."

At The *New York Times*, editors said the mother of the soldier did not remember Blair visiting her house, despite the story's references to her gestures and jewelry. Raines said the newspaper would apologize to the family.

Blair could not be reached for comment, but The *New York Times* quoted an official of the Newspaper Guild of New York as saying he was "not talking."

Another incident involving questionable passages occurred in February at the newspaper. In a sports column, the newspaper said, it failed to acknowledge "that a central quotation from the coach appeared three days earlier in an article by Bonnie DeSimone of The *Chicago Tribune* and that several other passages closely reflected her words."

The newspaper also came under scrutiny after it was discovered that a freelance writer had used fictional devices in a story for its magazine on November 18, 2001.

The article, headlined "Is Youssouf Male A Slave?" told the story of a young him-

self into service on a cocoa plantation.

The newspaper began an investigation after questions were raised about Male. Michael Finkel, the author of the story, later acknowledged that Male was a composite.

Triche

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five o'clock newscast went on the air. Copycats proliferated, followed soon thereafter by morning and midday productions, all heavily promoted.

ABC, CBS and NBC affiliates here each appear to have increased such programming, including promotion, by at least 400 percent since that first early evening newscast debuted. Henderson's independent mom-and-pop station—which doesn't know black people live in Southern Nevada—affiliated with the Fox News propaganda machine and was eventually dragged, kicking and screaming, into significance.

Despite increased commitment "to the community," there's still no local television program dealing with Afri-

can-American affairs...not bi-weekly, not monthly; not for a half-hour, not for fifteen minutes—and that's not the abomination.

The real outrages take place daily behind the scenes, off-camera, except when done on-air. They're manifest in decisions made and actions taken during editorial meetings and throughout the day by racist news managers; prejudiced technicians, copywriters, reporters and anchors, and garden-variety bigots who like to hurt us just for laughs. It's pathetic that they get away with so much because nobody complains...not even the blacks.

I know! Let's "investigate" some of those actions next week in a tribute to "Sweeps," when, after all, stations love to run exposes.

Please join us!

The City of Las Vegas is in the process of conducting a fair housing study and we need your input! BBC Research & Consulting (BBC), a consulting firm with expertise in fair housing studies, was hired by the city to conduct the study. We will be conducting a series of public meetings to gather information about fair housing.

We want to know:

- Do City residents face discrimination when trying to find housing?
- Is it easy to find the type of housing you want in Las Vegas?
- What can the City do to further fair housing choice?

We will also be presenting preliminary results from our study.

If you have questions about the forums, or need special accommodations for the meetings, please contact:

Heidi Aggeler

1 (800) 748-3222

email: aggeler@bbcresearch.com

Fair Housing public meeting schedule

May 20

Downtown Residents
Downtown Municipal Pool
431 Bonanza Road • 6 p.m.
(Bonanza & Las Vegas Blvd.)

May 21

West Las Vegas Residents
West Las Vegas Library
951 West Lake Mead Blvd. • 6 p.m.
(Lake Mead & H St.)

May 22

East Las Vegas Residents
East Las Vegas
Community/Senior Center
250 N. Eastern Avenue • 6 p.m.
(Eastern & Stewart)

May 27

Meadows Village Residents
Stupak Center
300 Boston • 6 p.m.
(Boston & Tam)