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Let the truth get in the way of a good story

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The New York Times is the most influential news media outlet in the US and perhaps the world. Eighteen months ago Howell Raines and Gerald Boyd, its two top editors, were forced from their jobs after a staff revolt sparked by the discovery that several dozen news stories written by Jayson Blair, a young reporter, included both plagiarism and fabrication. An important new book by the journalist Seth Mnookin reveals that the aftershocks of the controversy are still being felt.

The insurrection, Mnookin explains, had less to do with Mr Blair than with Mr Raines and Mr Boyd, who had encouraged and assisted Mr Blair's advancement. Had anyone checked, his spotty record as a college journalist would have precluded his employment. What is more, Jon Landman, one of Mr Blair's editors, had warned earlier: "We have to stop Jayson from writing for the Times." His admonition went unheeded. Instead, Mr Blair was assigned to an important criminal investigation, where fellow reporters questioned his use of unnamed sources even before his story was printed. Mr Raines, however, sent Mr Blair a congratulatory e-mail message, saying he was "very impressed" by his "great scoop". Months later the article was unmasked as one of Mr Blair's many frauds.

Mnookin rightly spends little time probing Mr Blair's personal psychoses. Mr Blair, like Mr Boyd, is African-American, and Mr Landman admitted that "race was the decisive factor in (Blair's) promotion" at the Times. But an excessive devotion to affirmative action did not bring about the downfall of Mr Raines and Mr Boyd. Instead, neither editor had won the professional respect of their staff, and the journalistic shortcomings underlying that failure had produced an explosive situation that was easily ignited by the revelation of Mr Blair's misconduct.

Mr Raines and Mr Boyd assumed their posts in 2001, chosen by Arthur Sulzberger Jr., the family-owned newspaper's youthful publisher, to invigorate what he and Mr Raines believed was an increasingly stodgy news staff. The Times won much praise, and a record number of Pulitzer Prizes, for its impressive coverage of September 11, 2001, and its aftermath, but once the dust settled Mr Raines inexplicably targeted some of his paper's best staff, not the worst.

Several top domestic correspondents, and the investigative editor, soon left for other newspapers. The replacement investigative editor moved to the Los Angeles Times within six months. "Raines was not somebody I wanted to work for," he explained to Mnookin, since Mr Raines "took a point of view on a story and pushed that point of view as hard as he could". Few reporters or editors were willing to argue with Mr Raines, even over what

Mnookin terms "biased political stories". The ominous result, he writes, was that "the newsroom began to feel that Raines was forcing bad journalism into the paper".

One top editor who did fight back was Jill Abramson, the Washington bureau chief. In contrast to the bad treatment accorded many staffers, Mr Raines gave personal acquaintances plum assignments and sought to replace Ms Abramson with Patrick Tyler, his closest friend. Ms Abramson successfully resisted but the battle brought Mr Raines yet more opprobrium. Ms Abramson tells Mnookin that "other reporters in the Washington bureau . . . were refusing to work with (Tyler) because they didn't trust his reporting".

Mr Raines' inverted journalistic values also seemed to "prize style over substance", most vividly in the case of Rick Bragg, another Raines friend, whom Mnookin says was "widely reviled" by his colleagues. Mr Bragg, like Mr Raines, is a native of the southern state of Alabama, and his folksy feature stories, which Mr Raines often forced on to the Times' front page, sometimes featured quotations and tales that fellow reporters thought were just too good to be true.

Just days after the Blair scandal broke, Times editors confronted an allegation that a Bragg story on Florida oystermen had been almost entirely reported by an uncredited and unpaid freelancer. Notwithstanding his picturesque account, Mr Bragg had barely set foot in the Florida town, and The Times published an apologetic correction. Mr Bragg angrily told The Washington Post that other Times correspondents worked similarly. Times reporters publicly denounced Mr Bragg and the next day he resigned. Mr Raines' ignominy deepened, and a deathwatch set in. Mr Sulzberger overcame his timidity and told Mr Raines and Mr Boyd they had to go. After a brief interregnum Bill Keller took the helm of the traumatised paper and Ms Abramson became his top deputy.

In the end the good guys prevailed, but Mnookin rightly is less interested in the Times' individual winners and losers than in the powerfully cautionary lesson his riveting account offers to all journalists. "Never let a compelling story get in the way of a true story," Mnookin says, and that's a precept that Mr Raines' New York Times repeatedly violated, not only in the cases of Mr Blair and Mr Bragg but also in Judith Miller's now largely discredited accounts of Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction. Distorted advocacy through journalism can mislead both readers and rulers, and never more so than when a paper as hugely influential as the New York Times is at fault. Hard News is a memorable warning that reporters and editors worldwide should heed.

The writer won a Pulitzer Prize for Bearing the Cross, his biography of Martin Luther King.