

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Samantha Grant. *A Fragile Trust: Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at the New York Times*. Bullfrog Films, 2014. documentary film, DVD, 75 minutes.

Reviewed by Jon Marshall (Northwestern University)

Published on Jhistory (February, 2016)

Commissioned by Robert A. Rabe

## Seeking the Truth about Lies

Reporter Jayson Blair's serial plagiarism and frequent fabrications deeply embarrassed the *New York Times* when they were discovered in 2003. Blair's transgressions led to the resignations of its executive and managing editors, and the mistrust he created continues to haunt journalism.

How could America's most prestigious newspaper stumble so badly? Why did a talented young reporter become a dedicated liar? What caused this breach of trust from which US journalism is still recovering?

In *A Fragile Trust: Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at the New York Times*, filmmaker Samantha Grant seeks to answer these questions. The documentary includes archival footage, scenes from the *Times* and other places Blair worked, creative graphics, and extensive interviews with participants in the events. Through deft use of this abundant material, Grant succeeds in delivering an informative and engaging documentary that will interest media scholars as well as their students.

The documentary's greatest strength is its interviews. We hear from Blair himself along with many people who worked with him at the *Times* including former executive editor Howell Raines, assistant managing editor Al Siegal, associate managing editor William Schmidt, political editor Jerry Gray, and fellow reporters Lena Williams, Adam Liptak, and Edward Wong. Former *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz and Seth Mnookin, the author of *Hard News* (2004), a book about Blair and the turmoil at the *Times*, provide perspective from their extensive research about the scandal.

The opening credits of *A Fragile Trust* launch the doc-

umentary's lively pace. Clips from television news shows about the scandal are interspersed with sound bites calling Blair "a pathological liar" and "a journalistic train wreck." Grant then asks Blair the question that the rest of the documentary explores: "Why did you do it?" Blair responds, "I don't have a good answer for the question.... The basic conclusion I come down to is that there isn't a simple one answer." Throughout the rest of the movie, Blair struggles to explain his motivations and never satisfactorily supplies an answer.

Following the initial interview with Blair, the film introduces us to Macarena Hernandez, a reporter for the *San Antonio Express-News* who once was a fellow intern with Blair at the *Times*. (Full disclosure: I met Hernandez once when she visited Northwestern University and spoke to our MSJ program's students; Grant once spoke to our program's students via Skype although I have never talked with her or met her in person.) Blair's downfall began when Hernandez discovered that he had copied quotations and descriptions from a story she had written about the family of a soldier, Edward Anguiano, who went missing during the early days of the American invasion of Iraq.

At first Blair insisted he had simply mixed up his notes, but soon it became clear that he had never actually gone to the south Texas town where the family lived. "I lied and I lied and I lied," Blair confesses in *A Fragile Trust*. "I had never left my apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn."

According to *A Fragile Trust*, Howard Kurtz received a tip about Blair's plagiarism and wrote a story about it in the *Washington Post*. Soon the scandal was being

discussed in newspapers around the country and on network newscasts. Hernandez notes that coverage of the Blair scandal eclipsed news about the death and funeral of Edward Anguiano. "To rob a family of their time to mourn is just unforgivable," Hernandez says.

Grant traces Blair's career back to his middle-class childhood, his decision in high school to become a journalist, and his success in the University of Maryland's journalism program. Before being hired full-time, Blair interned for two summers at the *Times*, where he quickly became known for his aggressiveness both as a reporter and a networker. "He clearly was a climber," political editor Jerry Gray recalls.

Blair's rise at the *Times* occurred during Howell Raines's aggressive reign as the newspaper's executive editor. Raines drove his staff hard, particularly in the months after the September 11 terrorist attacks, leading the newspaper to a record seven Pulitzer Prizes for its work that year.

Blair says in *A Fragile Trust* that he suffered through periods of depression followed by mania and increasingly turned to alcohol and cocaine. Overwhelmed by the intensity of the work demands, Blair concocted a story that his cousin had died in the terrorist attacks so he would not have to write profiles of any of the victims. His stories became riddled with errors, including one review of a benefit concert that he did not actually attend, instead watching the concert on television from his Brooklyn apartment while snorting cocaine. After submitting the review, Blair admitted to his substance abuse problem, and the *Times* immediately sent him to an outpatient drug and alcohol abuse clinic.

*A Fragile Trust* explains that as Raines relentlessly drove his staff to work harder, lower-level editors were given less authority while resentment and mistrust of him grew. After Blair returned to the *Times* following his time at the clinic, he was shuttled among departments with little communication by those who supervised him about his frequent lapses. Metro editor Jonathan Landman wrote a memo warning, "We must stop Jayson from writing for the Times. Right now!" But Raines claims in the documentary that he never saw Landman's memo. "The Times is a big place. All big places have bureaucracy," he says.

Instead Raines approved sending Blair to cover a series of sniper shootings in the Washington, DC, area, one of the biggest news events of the year. Blair soon started fabricating information for his stories and plagiarizing

from others when he could not keep up with the competition. On the surface it looked like Blair was trumping all of his competitors because his stories contained scoops no one else had. In reality, he had returned to his Brooklyn apartment where he continued to invent information.

*A Fragile Trust* recounts how Blair remained in Brooklyn when he was told to cover the Anguiano story in Texas, choosing to steal from Hernandez's story instead. Hernandez and *Express-News* executive editor Robert Rivard discovered remarkable similarities between her story and one Blair wrote for the front page of the *Times*. They exposed his lies, and the *Times* finally started digging into his other stories. When confronted, Blair at first denied never going to Texas but eventually confessed to his bosses, resigned, and was admitted to a hospital for psychiatric care.

Eventually the *Times* published a front-page apology disclosing that editors had found thirty-six stories by Blair containing deception. The fraud became a symbol of the shortcomings of the news industry. Raines and managing editor Gerald M. Boyd resigned in the wake of the Blair scandal, and the *Times* hired a public editor to try to regain the trust of its readers.

Grant does not supply a simple answer for how this journalistic disaster occurred. Instead she presents a complex web of personal and institutional failings: the pressure reporters feel to constantly feed stories to their publications and appear on page 1, the ease of using the Internet to stitch together information from other publications without doing any original reporting, the bureaucracy of a large organization such as the *Times*, and the arrogance of leaders who do not listen to their subordinates. These factors became a toxic mix when combined with Blair's insecurity, constant striving, bipolar disorder, and addiction to alcohol and cocaine.

*A Fragile Trust* rejects the conclusion by some commentators that Blair's downfall was the result of affirmative action gone awry. Although Blair, an African American, was hired as part of a much-needed effort to diversify the *Times's* staff, Grant notes that other journalists caught in ethical wrongdoing, such as Stephen Glass of the *New Republic*, Mike Barnicle of the *Boston Globe*, and Jack Kelley of *USA Today* have been white. The film argues that Boyd, an African American, was unfairly blamed for protecting Blair, when that was not the case.

In *A Fragile Trust*, Blair says that his editors at the

*Times* should have realized he was falling apart psychologically and stopped him from writing for the newspaper. In contrast, Mnookin places the blame squarely on Blair's shoulders, noting that he began lying in his articles as early as high school and continued doing so throughout his career. The film concludes that Blair betrayed his newspaper, his sources, and his readers. "The only thing you have as a journalist is trust," Hernandez says. "It's a very fragile trust. And that's why it's so easy to lose it."

While Mnookin's book remains the most thorough account of the Blair scandal, *A Fragile Trust* is a valuable resource for instructors particularly because of the power of its interviews and the clarity of its storytelling. It is recommended for use in media ethics and history courses and could also provide interesting insights as supplemental viewing for psychology and management classes. The movie is available in a 74-minute theater version and a 57-minute classroom format.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Jon Marshall. Review of Grant, Samantha, *A Fragile Trust: Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at the New York Times*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. February, 2016.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45582>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.