# Technology: The Great Enabler?

How Jayson Blair Conned the *New York Times*

In 1971, British writer and scientist C.P. Snow told the *New York Times*, "Technology … is a queer thing. It brings you great gifts with one hand, and it stabs you in the back with the other." The editors of the *Times* have recently experienced the truth of this observation all too well. In May, Jayson Blair, a 27-year-old reporter for the paper, was revealed as a plagiarist, fabulist, and, as it happens, a savvy user of contemporary communications technology.

Blair "misled readers and *Times* colleagues with dispatches that purported to be from Maryland, Texas and other states, when often he was far away, in New York. He fabricated comments. He concocted scenes. He lifted material from other newspapers and wire services. He selected details from photographs to create the impression he had been somewhere or seen someone, when he had not," the *Times* said, in a 7,000-word mea culpa published in the paper in May. His "widespread fabrication and plagiarism represent a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper," the *Times* noted.

Blair did this by exploiting the very technologies that make possible the constant stream of news and information we modern consumers now demand. Using cell phones, e-mail, photo archives, and electronic research databases that allowed him to call up instantly every recent story already written about a given subject, Blair pieced together reports packed with memorable scenes and "you had to be there" immediacy. As editors at the *Times* eventually realized, tools of the contemporary journalistic trade facilitated Blair's untruths. "His tools of deceit were a cell phone and a laptop computer—which allowed him to blur his true whereabouts—as well as round-the-clock access to databases of news articles from which he stole," said the *Times*.

Blair is not the first ethically-challenged journalist to use technology for his ill-gotten stories. Stephen Glass, a former writer for *The New Republic*, concocted a phony website in a desperate attempt to cover his tracks when evidence of his numerous fabrications emerged in the late 1990s. The very tools that have made modern journalism possible—and that are appropriately used every day by thousands of writers and researchers to great effect—can also be used to undermine the code of journalistic ethics at the heart of the profession.

Of course, some observers feel that such ethical hand-wringing is unnecessary. After all, they say, all the world's a creative stage, and since there's nothing new under the sun (so to speak) why not pick and choose from the bounty of words and images that technology has made available to us? "So-called 'appropriation' art can be seen in everything from Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans to Marcel Duchamp's early 20th-century idea of 'ready-made' art," reported the *Christian Science Monitor* in July. "Even Shakespeare, it's often pointed out, stole his plots from earlier works." The article notes that even as venerable a reference work as the *Oxford Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art* argues, "in a world dominated by technology and the mass media, culture inevitably becomes superficial and self-referential."

Still, some of those who remain hung-up on old fashioned notions like integrity and giving credit where it's due are trying to close a few of the more obvious technological

loopholes that might tempt plagiarists. Microsoft has hit upon one such novel solution, embedding an electronic signature in its digital reference works. As the *Houston Chronicle* reported in July, "if students try to copy and paste a section of Encarta Reference Library 2004 into their essay and use it as their own work, they'll find every passage automatically includes '1993-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.' Although it's easily deletable, it's a nice guilty-conscience approach to curb growing plagiarism occurrences."

And of course it was technology itself that tripped up Blair: While perusing the online version of the *Times*, a *San Antonio Express-News* reporter noticed striking similarities between Blair's work and one of her own published pieces, precipitating a larger investigation of his reporting.

Then again, some blame certainly lies at the feet of the profession embarrassed by the misdeeds of people such as Blair and Glass; editors at prominent publications seem all too eager to give known offenders a second chance. In an ironic bookend to a tawdry tale, the *New York Post* reported in July that Blair will write a review of *Shattered Glass*, a movie based on Stephen Glass's tainted tenure at *The New Republic* for *Esquire*, and that *Jane* magazine has also hired Blair to pen a piece about workplace stress, of all things. Glass himself recently published *The Fabulist*, a thinly-fictionalized account of his experiences at *The New Republic*, and *Rolling Stone* announced that it had hired him to write about marijuana laws in Canada.

But of course, the fact that modern communications technologies made the lies of Blair and other fabricators possible is no reason to regret or to limit their use. New tools have vastly improved the craft of reporting and the quality and quantity of news and knowledge at our disposal. Plagiarism and deceit in journalism did not begin with the Internet, and will not be stopped by any new technology. The best solution to the problem is to blame the sinner for his sin, and not the technology that made it easier.