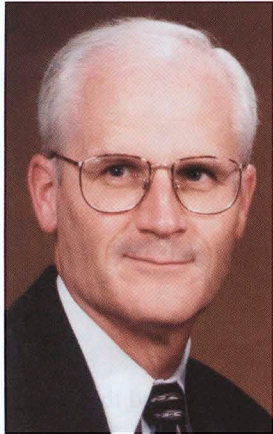


Perspectives



CLEANING UP JOURNALISM'S MESS

BY STEVE DAVIS

In the newspaper business, some have characterized the Jayson Blair plagiarism case as a wake-up call. *The New York Times* reporter made up datelines, scenes, quotes, conversations, even his expense account entries. But we seem to have dozed through dozens of alarms; the cheating continues in waves.

Perhaps because it's *The New York Times*, and Blair's deception was so egregious, it's presumed this is the case that will make a difference. I hope so. But I don't think so.

How and why things got so messed up at the *Times* and who is responsible is not that befuddling. The reasons range from the obvious—top editors ignored their lieutenants' well-founded and unambiguous advice to fire Blair—to conjecture that former newsroom chief Howell Raines, who quit in June, forgave Blair's gross and growing errors because Blair was a favorite and an African American whose success would reflect well on the boss.

There is probably some truth here. What's for sure: Editors dropped the ball in not only failing to fire Blair, but also in assigning him the nation's hottest headline, the D.C.-area sniper story. Blair's bosses were sloppy, on one occasion failing to question a sketchy scoop based on five anonymous sources.

Even when wrongdoers are caught, too many editors and educators look for reasons to excuse this behavior, to rationalize it, to give a second chance. Their argument: Consider the circumstances. Every case is different. There are nuances of intent, degrees of malfeasance, just like in any crime. Show a measure of mercy.

Should a 19-year-old student cheater get the "death sentence"—kicked out of school? Or should school administrators parse the circumstances and consider an F for the assignment or for the course, or perhaps a semester-long suspension?

How about veteran reporters? Should years of service be disregarded? Should management devote weeks to checking out every story the accused has written (as the *Times* did with Blair)?

Do newsrooms and journalism schools need a penal code, a range of punishments so everyone knows what sanctions fit what crimes? Yes. And the more precise these are, the less the inclination to find exceptions, to make excuses, to commit mistakes of the heart or of expedience. The trends argue to get tougher. Course syllabi explain fabrication and plagiarism, and professors review them in class. University handbooks are clear.

Yet, my own classroom experience has been discouraging. In a couple of years I have dealt with two confirmed cases of plagiarism and I have been unaware, I am sure, of others.

I and others overestimate our ability to spot plagiarists. I informally polled 30 students in reporting classes, and in their anonymous responses they estimated half their classmates had made up or stolen something for a story. A number of my colleagues, though genuinely concerned, raised doubts about what these responses really said. But if I were alarmist, perhaps they were too quick to discount the students' self-reports. These surveys were hardly scientific, one argument went, and wouldn't the students tend to overestimate the problem anyway? Perhaps. But with every day, reality and common sense argue otherwise. I was particularly shocked by a case in my classroom last year, committed by a student I would have pegged least likely to cheat. So much for journalists' gut instinct.

What are we to do? Here are some ideas:

- Define plagiarism clearly and circulate the standards to everybody. Set out the rules and the consequences for violating them in writing, and commit to enforce them, whether the violator is the best young prospect, the most veteran and beloved reporter, or the student with the highest GPA. Journalism schools should require students to take one-credit classes devoted to this subject. The argument against this—that we can't afford to cram in another credit hour and that plagiarism education should be incorporated into every class—would be a fine pitch to make, except that's what we're doing now.

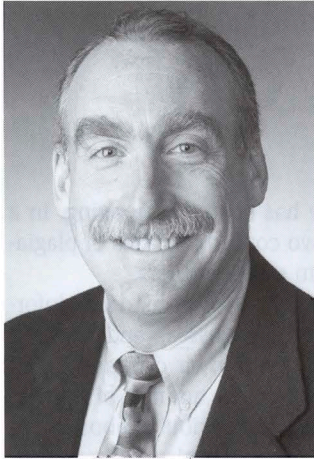
- Hire more ombudsmen at newspapers, and employ the equivalent in journalism schools. These in-house watchdogs check out reader complaints or shoddy or questionable practices, and they are a good guard against sloppy and dishonest work. Newspapers are supposed to be public watchdogs; yet they resist someone watching *them*. Many editors argue that the readers and news sources keep an eye on the newspaper. But the *Times'* experience shows readers have come to accept errors, or have been ignored when they object. The *Times*, which always has resisted an ombudsman, finally gave in this summer and announced on July 30 that it will hire a "public editor."

- Sign contracts with students in classrooms and with professionals in newsrooms. Some schools have their students initial pledges acknowledging they know the rules and the penalties. Would a get-tough policy offend students? Some, perhaps. But honest students know a lot of cheating goes on—they have told me so—and they are as depressed and angry as anyone.

There have been grand-scale incidents like this before: 20 years ago, *Washington Post* writer Janet Cooke wrote fiction so good it won the Pulitzer Prize. *The Washington Post* survived. The Blair case will not lead to the demise of the *Times*, or deliver a permanently damaging blow to the industry. Or will it?

If life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond, now is the time for us to seriously get to work on the 90.

Steve Davis is the new chair of the newspaper department at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications.



HAPHAZARD HEALTH CARE

BY THOMAS H. DENNISON

Perspectives

The so-called health care “system” in the United States is a study in contradictions. The World Health Organization, in its recent report on the status of health systems around the world, rated ours first in the world in terms of responsiveness (quality of basic amenities, choice, dignity, and prompt attention), but only 55th in terms of financial fairness (a measure based on fairness of financial contribution and risk protection). Most Americans believe they are entitled to health care, most are fairly satisfied with the health care they receive, and most have financial access to health care of the highest quality. Yet roughly 45 million people—1 in 6 people under age 65—do not have health insurance and, as a result, often experience problems accessing the care they need. Millions more are underinsured because their insurance limits the amount and type of benefits to which they are entitled.

The health care industry in the United States is a hodgepodge of public and private interests. Slightly less than half of health care is financed by the public sector (Medicare and Medicaid—public insurance for the elderly and poor, and public institutions that provide direct health care services, such as Veterans Administration hospitals for military veterans). Slightly more than half of health care is financed by the private sector (mainly through employment-related insurance subsidized by employers who have shouldered a significant portion of the cost of health care since World War II). Likewise, our hospitals and nursing homes are a mix of both public and private interests: the private organizations include both nonprofit agencies driven by a mission to treat the sick or the poor and underserved, and private, for-profit enterprises whose primary obligation is to make money for their shareholders. Physician practice is, by and large, private business.

Our health care system makes the latest and greatest technologies readily available to us, but they are expensive. The cost of personal health care services in the United States is the highest, by any measure, of any country in the world. Largely as a result of this high cost, insurance premiums have risen to the point at which many people cannot afford to purchase even employer-subsidized health insurance. And employers, whose premium costs are included in the price of their products, find they are less competitive in the global marketplace. For the past 25 years, a variety of initiatives has been under-

taken by federal, state, and local governments, and the private sector to reduce health care spending (or at least reduce the rate of increase in spending). None of these initiatives has produced lasting results.

We are now in an escalating debate about the cost of health care. Employers are trying to cut their spending on health care coverage for workers and retirees. Government, at all levels, is looking to reduce costs by cutting payments to providers, limiting entitlements for participants, and closing public health care institutions. Meanwhile, consumer demand remains unabated.

The number of uninsured Americans, particularly during this slow economy, has increased. Cross-subsidies between private, paying patients—to cover charity care and inadequate payment levels by insurance plans—and government payors, which we have relied on for years, are drying up. There have been calls for “reform,” but no agreement on what reform means or what model of health care delivery is socially, politically, and economically acceptable.

At the core, there is no health care system. We lack both a well-articulated statement of what we, as Americans, expect of health care and a policy that reflects and grows out of that statement. Our health care industry evolved in a rather haphazard way. The delivery system has responded to consumer demand and market forces by providing more and more service. Public financing for segments of the population has been made available as the political will of the time dictated. Growing costs have strained the ability of the private financing system to play the same role it did in the past. But never did we develop and implement overarching policies that focus on what we want from a health care system.

We can't have it all. We can't have the high quality of care we have become accustomed to, as well as universal coverage and low costs. Unless we agree either that unlimited resources should be made available to provide health care, or that it's acceptable to exclude entire groups of the population from financial protection, we must address the only remaining option—the reality that it will be necessary and efficient to ration services.

Thomas H. Dennison, Ph.D., teaches in the Program in Health Services Management at the Maxwell School.



REVITALIZING URBAN HOUSING

BY ELIZABETH KAMELL

Walking through a housing development in Brooklyn, students involved in the School of Architecture's Community Design Center (CDC) got a firsthand look at what is usually a textbook lesson about urban architecture. Reactions to the 1971 complex designed by contemporary architecture critic Kenneth Frampton varied among the students. One claimed it was scary and the worst neighborhood he'd ever seen. Another concluded that despite the architect's intentions, the well-designed development hadn't changed the culture of poverty and crime in the neighborhood. Such visits to housing developments allow students to evaluate architecture in its social and urban contexts, enabling them to make a complex assessment of both design intentions and applications. In this case, the design was spawned from the architectural and social ambitions of the 1960s, an era in which architecture was thought to have redemptive possibilities.

In the past year, the CDC has twice undertaken research that examines the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC). Between 1968 and 1974, this state-sponsored entity—which SU Trustee H. Douglas Barclay G'61, H'98 helped create as a state senator—completed 115 housing projects, accommodating more than 100,000 people in 55 communities from New York City to Buffalo. Students from art, public affairs, and architecture participated in the CDC research initiative and studied the sociopolitical and architectural implications of housing.

However, the study, or more generally, the production of housing in the United States, as either an architectural or urban social issue, is not one that heralds the attention of the academy or architects, as it did when the UDC was established. At that time, housing initiatives had the support of a government and a public that understood their link to the War on Poverty and the Great Society programs of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Architecture was understood as a positive manifestation of progressive social policy, one in which housing was a human right, and this philosophy drove UDC administrators. The mission to build high-quality housing that embodied social aspirations led the UDC to hire young, inventive architects who often united social and architectural/urban concerns in their designs.

Though the quality of neighborhoods built by the UDC was uneven, the zeal and ambition of its administrators brought

public attention to housing as an architectural and social issue. In 1973, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City exhibited a UDC-sponsored study by Peter Eisenman's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies that examined new prototypes for public housing. The UDC also initiated one of the most visible architectural events of the era—a housing design competition for Roosevelt Island, a long strip of land in the middle of the East River. It generated interest from young architects around the world, including Rem Koolhaas and Richard Meier.

But the optimism and social progressivism of the early '60s yielded to social unrest that threatened political stability later in the decade. American housing projects, or "towers in the park," as they came to be known, that were at one time considered part of the solution to social inequality began to be discredited. Critics reassessed the relationship among urban housing type, economic stability, and social welfare, prompting policy makers and architects to rethink Modernist models. In 1973, five years after the UDC's creation, President Richard M. Nixon pulled the plug on federal housing subsidies, eliminating the capacity of agencies like the UDC to function effectively, even with substantial contributions of private investment partners.

Since that time, federal spending on housing has shrunk to historically low levels, and homelessness in the United States has increased. Opportunities to design public housing are infrequent. Perhaps because of that, American architecture school curricula often neglect urban housing, so few students are adequately exposed to the subject. Yet, housing is as important an issue as it ever was; approximately 75 percent of the built fabric in cities is residential.

Since the UDC's demise in the early '70s, the only significant consideration given to rethinking low- and moderate-income housing models has been generated by the New Urbanist agenda. Under the direction of former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros, the New Urban model was employed to transform the failed public housing built in the '50s and '60s. But the New Urban "fix" to the American version of Modernist projects, whose formal problems were exacerbated by social and economic ones, does not serve dense urban populations well. The only way for that to happen is for government to reengage in the business of housing as a demonstration of its commitment to essential human rights.

As a facilitator of invention and technological advance, the government also has a role. Though the UDC had many failings, its objectives may serve as a model for contemporary urban housing programs when they do reemerge—objectives that promote technological and architectural invention, that examine the relationship between urban form and social ideals.

There are no simple answers. Housing is a large proportion of our built environment. It is important that a new generation of public policy makers and architects take interest in, and gain knowledge of, housing issues. Perhaps by exposing young architects to these issues, urban housing will again get the attention it deserves.

Elizabeth Kamell, B. Arch., M. Arch., is an assistant professor at the School of Architecture and director of the Community Design Center. A licensed architect, she has practiced in New York City, Boston, and Florence, Italy. Her research focuses on urban housing and residential block design.