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True Confessions of The New York Times: Making Moral Meaning from the Discourse of Flawed Iraq Coverage

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Introduction:
The Mea Culpa

On the morning of May 26, 2004, *New York Times* readers found a note from the paper's editors on Page A10. Other newspaper readers across the country found the same note in their own dailies; it was one of the wire stories available that day to the 300 papers that subscribe to the Times News Service. The headline read "From the Editors – The *Times* and Iraq," and the 1,000-word article that followed served as an explanation to readers that the *Times* had failed in its duty of both aggressive information gathering and reporting with a critical eye, specifically in regard to its coverage of the lead-up to the Iraq war. While the editors maintained that much of the *Times'* reporting was solid, their note to readers focused on:

> a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged. Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged – or failed to emerge ("From the Editors," 2004, p. A10).

Unlike the now infamous Jayson Blair case at *The New York Times*, the problems here couldn't be pinned on one misguided journalist. The failure in coverage, editors implied, was an institutional one; the problematic articles were written and edited by a number of staff members. However, the articles did share a common feature. "They depended at least in part on information from a circle of Iraqi informants, defectors and exiles bent on 'regime change' in Iraq, people whose credibility has come under increasing public debate in recent weeks" (p. A10).

The articles made claims that Iraq housed terrorist training camps, hidden weapons facilities, and biological weapons labs and that Saddam Hussein's regime had ties to Al Qaeda. "Articles based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display [often on Page 1], while follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried. In some cases, there was no follow-up at all" (p. A10).

In the note, editors listed several specific examples of coverage spanning from October 2001 through April 2003 and pointed out particular problem areas, often stemming from sources whose claims were taken, in many respects, at face value. After pointing readers to an on-line site that included a sample of the coverage in question, the editors ended their note this way:

> We consider the story of Iraq's weapons, and the pattern of misinformation, to be unfinished business. And we fully intend to continue aggressive reporting aimed at setting the record straight (p. A10).

<u>The Aftermath.</u> Response to the editors' note was fast and widespread. Not only did Daniel Okrent, the *Times'* public editor, use his column four days later to present an in-depth analysis of the failure, news people at papers across the country commented on the note in their papers. Discussions also ran in journalism trade publications such as *Editor & Publisher*, on radio programs such as NPR's "Weekend Edition" and on sites for media criticism such as PressThink, the project of Columbia University scholar Jay Rosen. Between May 26 – the day the editors' note ran – and June 3, no fewer than 20 responses appeared in the form of columns, stories and analyses in U.S. media outlets. While some of these focused particularly on the *Times*' flawed coverage and how that coverage may have affected public opinion about the war, others responded to the *Times*' decision to "talk" to its readers, to "come clean" about its failures.

The discourse surrounding the *Times'* disclosure – the editors' note together with the responses it generated – provides a glimpse into the state of American journalism and the way those enmeshed in it understand and expect the practice to operate. Beyond serving a descriptive purpose, however, the texts of the report and responses can be used to start a new discourse in the normative realm, to offer suggestions for how our understanding of journalism perhaps ought to change to better reflect the reality of what is, after all, a human institution.

The following discussion provides both a descriptive and normative analysis of two themes that emerge within the discourse of *The New York Times* editors' note and the responses to it. First, the failure at the *Times* seems to add another notch to the credibility crisis in which U.S. journalism currently finds itself. The disclosure and the responses bring to light concerns about the press and its performance and make more tangible recent accusations from the public that it is losing its trust in the press.[i]

If the first trend illuminates problems, the second shows progress by demonstrating that the press, or at least one of its most powerful organizations, recognizes that it is a fallible, human institution and one that should – is even morally required to – communicate with its audiences about the process of news telling. It is through precedent-setting cases like this one that the practice of journalism can step back, take a look at itself, and then continue moving forward in a landscape constantly in flux.

Illuminating the Problems: Journalism's Deepening Credibility Crisis

Early in 2004, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, in affiliation with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, released the first of what is to be an annual report on the state of the American news media. In its investigation of the public and the press, the study found that public attitudes about journalism have been declining for nearly 20 years. "Americans think journalists are sloppier, less professional, less moral, less caring, more biased, less honest about their mistakes and generally more harmful to democracy than they did in the 1980s" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004, "Public Attitudes," ¶2). On top of that, Americans are wary of journalists' motives, believing that ambition, self-interest and a drive to make money take precedence over working in the public interest. All of these critiques describe a social institution in the midst of a credibility crisis – a crisis only exacerbated by problems like those at *The New York Times*. The following section introduces three particular facets of the credibility crisis that were illuminated when the *Times* disclosed the failures of its Iraq coverage.

A Crisis of Conventions. The most comprehensive analysis of and commentary on the *Times*' disclosure came from within the paper itself four days after the editors' note ran. A handful of media watchers speculated that public editor Daniel Okrent had been investigating the issue for some time before the paper's editors took action and that the editors' note was an attempt to preempt anything that might come from Okrent. Others were quick to say that the *Times* was late in speaking out on the issue; after all, Jack Shafer of the online magazine *Slate* had called on *The New York Times* every three of four days for more than a year to take a look at its Iraq coverage. Still others remarked that the timing of the note was overly coincidental; it came out only days after the U.S. administration had repudiated Ahmed Chalabi – an Iraqi defector, key informant to the United States, and one of the *Times'* primary sources. All of these questions of timing led Tim Rutten of the *Los Angeles Times* to say that "the [*New York*] *Times'* explanation looks like a leaky lifeboat launched in the teeth of a gathering storm" (Rutten, 2004, p. E1). Jay Rosen on his weblog PressThink was slightly more compassionate in his assessment of the note's timing, remarking that "sustained criticism from without, interacting with events, triggered an internal audit, and an official act of self-criticism was published in the *Times*" (2004, ¶ 8). Whatever the case and regardless of the timing, Okrent reported in his column that the *Times* editors examined the paper's coverage independently of his own. And in his final assessment, Okrent reported that "they [the editors] got it right. Mostly" (2004, Sec. 4, p. 2).

Okrent called his column a bit like a Journalism 101 course and in it criticized several journalistic "imperatives and practices" – exacerbated by the culture of the *Times* newsroom – that conspired to lead the paper down an unfortunate path. When taken as a whole, these imperatives and practices tell one tale: Journalism is a competition, a race to get the big story…and then to get the next big story. And news organizations, as well as individual reporters, are playing to win. In disclosing the paper's flawed coverage, Okrent argued that *The New York Times* editors explained *how* the paper failed, but they neglected to explain *why* it failed – what journalistic imperatives and practices drove the actions that led to the substandard reporting. For Okrent, these actions were driven by journalists' charge to:

- Be first. Journalism has a hunger for scoops, and in some of the *Times'* coverage, the drive to be first took precedence over that of being right.
- Write for the front page. According to Okrent, "There are few things more greedily desired than a byline on Page 1," and those bylines are best achieved by making aggressive assertions that make big impacts (2004, Sec. 4, p.2).
- Get the big story; never mind the follow-up. Okrent called this hit-and-run journalism. Rather than revisiting a big story and re-examining the assertions made in it, *Times* reporters put their efforts toward the next big story. Failing to follow-up, Okrent argued, may be conventional behavior, but it is a grave mistake. "Stories, like plants, die if they are not tended. So do the reputations of newspapers" (2004, Sec. 4, p. 2).
- Coddle your sources to get what you want. Many sources in the *Times'* coverage went unnamed, only described as Iraqi defectors, exiles, informants, or American intelligence sources. But, as Okrent argued, information does not earn immunity; a source's misdeeds must be revealed, and reporters must be willing to help do that. A source who turns out to have lied has breached the contract that offers immunity in exchange for information, and that breach justifies exposure by the reporter. According to Okrent, "When the cultivation of a source leads to what amounts to a free pass for the source, truth takes the fall" (2004, Sec. 4, p. 2).
- Cast aside standard practices in non-standard times. Okrent called this behavior end-run editing, a result of some reporters working outside the lines of customary

bureau management; meanwhile, others with reservations about a story are denied the opportunity to express those reservations. "It is axiomatic in newsrooms that any given reporter's story, tacked up on a dartboard, can be pierced by challenges from any number of colleagues," Okrent said. "When a particular story is consciously shielded from such challenges, it suggests that it contains something that plausibly should be challenged" (2004, Sec. 4, p. 2). End-run editing can also result from reporters pushing hard and editors failing to push back, failing to require their writers to slow down and back up assertions or take out information that goes too far. As *Slate's* Jack Shafer said, responsibility for a newspaper's content – as well as the placement of that content – ultimately rests on the shoulders of editors (Shafer cited in Kurtz, 2004). But in the race to get out a big story, editorial scrutiny can be substituted for blind faith in the reporter's work; reporters, then, can be aided and abetted by editors.

Two days before Okrent's column ran, Paul Krugman, also of *The New York Times*, raised another journalistic imperative that proved problematic for the *Times* and its Iraq coverage; he called it the tyranny of evenhandedness and described it as the equivalent of being non-biased. In this instance, the tyranny of evenhandedness played out when journalists – ever the bearer of the ultra-liberal label – "bent over backward to say nice things about conservatives" in a desperate effort to avoid being pinned as "irrational Bush haters" (Krugman, 2004, p. A21). The irony in this case, as Don Wycliff of the *Chicago Tribune* said, is that "the bell cow of the 'liberal media' herd turn[ed] out to have been the chief public promoter of the ideas that justified President Bush's push for war" (2004, ¶ 6). Some critics have contended that Howell Raines, executive editor of the *Times* during the lead-up to the war, may have thought the reporting could help counter the paper's reputation for liberal bias, but, in the end, the attempt at evenhandedness had unforeseen consequences.

Okrent would surely agree that the imperatives and practices outlined above are not unique to *The New York Times* but are rather journalistic conventions that most news organizations find themselves operating within much of the time. What makes this case notable is that problems arising from imperatives and practices at *The New York Times* cause reverberations that are felt far and wide – reverberations that only contribute to journalism's growing credibility crisis.

A Crisis of Authority. The second problem illuminated by the editors' note and subsequent responses relates to the *Times'* authority, particularly the threat to that authority caused by the paper's failures. What happens when the country's most respected newspaper – the paper of record – stumbles? And what does this do to the credibility of the institution of the press itself?

It is widely recognized that the U.S. press as a social institution is tremendously powerful; it has the ability to set the agenda, to influence public opinion, and to more generally construct the reality that Americans "see." *The New York Times* holds the most lofty of positions, and the Times' influence became the topic of commentary by several columnists who responded to the editors' note. In his column for *The Hartford Courant*, journalism professor Paul Janensch said:

> The *Times* is not just another newspaper. It is devoured every morning by opinion leaders in New York, Washington and around the country. Virtually every important news operation in the country – in the world, for that matter – is influenced by what the *Times* puts on Page 1 (2004, ¶ 4).

Janensch's comments were echoed by Don Wycliff, who said of the editors' note:

> [it] called attention to the *Times'* status as an agenda-setter, both for national policymakers and in American journalism. The fact that *The New York Times* was writing so regularly and seemingly with such authority about Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and his terrorist ties carried enormous weight in Washington (2004, ¶ 4).

In his column, Wycliff included a comment by Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin, who said that the *Times'* coverage "blunted a lot of criticism and cowed a lot of critics" (2004, ¶ 4). This blunting effect, according to Wycliff, resulted in other news organizations finding it difficult to challenge what had become the "reigning consensus about the threat posed by the Hussein regime" (2004, 5). Jay Rosen made a similar point. The relationship between the *Times* and its peers gets to the heart of the newspaper's power and reputation. "The *Times* and its front page have always had a powerful influence on the judgment of regional editors and other gatekeepers" (Rosen, 2004, ¶ 24).

Large and small newspapers alike depend on the extensive resources of the *Times* to provide them with stories of national and international import. The assumption is that the *Times* is doing it right, and the millions of readers who see the world through the lens of the *Times* put faith in the paper of record that the record is, in fact, accurate. So when *The New York Times* falters, as Gina Lubrano of *The San Diego Union-Tribune* said, "there may be consequences for publications thousands of miles from the Big Apple" (2004, p. B9). For the San Diego paper, which subscribes to the Times News Service, the consequences took the form of seven problematic *New York Times* stories running in the *Union-Tribune* and a call for *Union-Tribune* editors to "add yet another layer of skepticism and listen to their own instincts when stories do not feel quite right" (Lubrano, 2004, p. B9).

At other papers that receive *New York Times* stories over the wire, the reaction was similar. According to Janensch, "The *Times'* mea culpa caught editors at those newspapers by surprise, and they were wondering what to tell their readers about the now-discredited *Times* stories they had published" (2004, ¶ 5). Paul Moore of *The Baltimore Sun* quoted his paper's editor, who said that "groups of readers will feel even more emboldened now to demand we review our work" (Franklin cited in Moore, 2004, p. 5C). And Gene Harbrecht of *The Orange County Register*, said that his paper will pledge to "intensify the screening of all news service stories, particularly the *Times*" because the failure by the *Times* damaged not only its credibility but, by extension, the credibility of the *Register* as well (2004, ¶ 14). In this screening process, staffers at the *Register* will consider the sourcing on *New York Times* stories, question the conclusions drawn, compare findings from the *Times* with other services to gauge their validity, and pay attention to the "track record for accuracy of the individual reporters as we have come to know their work" (Harbrecht, 2004, ¶ 15).

Interesting to note in these comments is a kind of "us" versus "them" mentality, an assumption that *The New York Times* alone is to blame – that the commentators' own papers are somehow exempt from failings like this. These responses to the editors' note also demonstrate a lack of recognition that journalism is not only a group of autonomous organizations but a collective, a social institution with shared struggles as well as shared triumphs. In these columns, journalists set themselves and their colleagues apart from *The New York Times* and implied that the credibility threat lies only with the *Times* and not with the press as a whole.

There were, however, a few exceptions to this trend. On CNN's "Reliable Sources," *Washington Post* ombudsman Michael Getler made the point that the problems at the *Times* are not necessarily unique to it:

> I think there's nothing more important than going back and looking at the pre-war coverage. There's been nothing quite like this is the last several decades. And every news organization needs to go back and see how they did (Getler cited in Kurtz, 2004, ¶ 143).

While readers may recognize that the mistakes of one organization are not necessarily those of another, they also tend to view the press in a holistic way – as a social institution. And the credibility of that institution rises and falls not on the efforts of a single organization but on the collective actions and the use of power by the profession as a whole. Reactions to the editors' note that failed to recognize the collective threat to journalistic credibility represent only another problem in how the press views itself – as disparate, often competitive entities rather than as a public trust with the shared goal of enhancing knowledge in a landscape that can be extremely complex.

A(nother) Crisis of Objectivity. In an October 2003 ZNet commentary, Robert Jensen, University of Texas professor and former newsperson, recounted his memories of the night he and his colleagues in the newsroom created what he called a hierarchy of facts.

> We created five or six categories. I can't recall the whole list and long ago lost the chart we made that night, but I remember the top and bottom categories. Resting on the top, in the most exalted position, was the category of facts to which journalists are most wedded, the facts editors like best: Documented Facts. On the bottom were the facts that potentially cause the most trouble for journalists: True Facts (Jensen, 2003, ¶ 3).

The point, Jensen said, was that "the way in which contemporary mainstream journalists gather facts about the world privileges those things that can be documented, especially from 'credible' and 'authoritative' sources" (2003, ¶ 5). With documented facts, journalists get two-fold benefits. First, they get information they can attribute to someone or something, which is a safe way of mitigating all kinds of liability. Second, this method of passing along documented facts from credible and authoritative sources saves journalists the work of actually verifying the facts with evidence that goes beyond documentation or of uncovering the truth themselves. The problem with documented facts, however, is that they are not necessarily the equivalent of true facts.

The discrepancy between documented facts and true facts is nothing new; a moment's reflection back to the 1950s brings up memories of a load of trouble that a certain Joe McCarthy caused for journalists of the time. This first "crisis of objectivity" came during McCarthy's hunt for communists in America. McCarthy – a U.S. senator and the epitome of a credible and authoritative source – understood journalists and their processes of gathering and reporting the news. McCarthy knew that dutiful journalists would report whatever utterances he made. Consequently, more than one hundred American citizens were accused of being communists and tried for their "crimes" in congressional hearings as well as in the court of public opinion – the press. But the journalists had been duped, and their method of accurately conveying McCarthy's utterances – his documented facts – turned out to be woefully inaccurate and even untrue (Marzolf, 1991).

Reporters at *The New York Times* may have also kept their own biases out of their work and objectively collected information to pass along to readers, but as history has demonstrated repeatedly, documented facts don't always lead to the truth. The editors of The New York Times recognized this, noting that the problematic articles:

> depended at least in part on information from a circle of Iraqi informants, defectors and exiles bent on "regime change" in Iraq, people whose creditability has come under increasing public debate in recent weeks…Complicating matters for journalists, the accounts of these exiles were often eagerly confirmed by United States officials convinced of the need to intervene in Iraq. Administration officials now acknowledge that they sometimes fell for misinformation from these exile sources. So did many news organizations – in particular, this one ("From the Editors," 2004, Sec. 4, p. 2).

So, what readers see with *The New York Times* today quite closely mimics the McCarthy-era crisis of objectivity. According to journalism professor and *Miami Herald* columnist Edward Wasserman, the *Times* admitted not that it erred, but that "in its haste to dominate coverage, it was systematically manipulated by sources to whom its reporters became captive" (2004, ¶ 14). Through the paper's reliance on these highly placed and seemingly credible sources, entirely accurate stories can end up being, as Dan Kennedy of the *Boston Phoenix* called them, entirely false. "Miller [author of several articles in question], her fellow reporters, and their editors had forgotten the Ben Bradlee rule. They had thought they were printing the truth when, in fact, they were only printing what people had told them" (Kennedy, 2004, ¶ 3).

In a *Los Angeles Times* column, Tim Rutten called the controversy surrounding the Times' Iraq coverage, "the most serious of the credibility crises that have afflicted America's mainstream news media over the past two years" (2004, E1). The *Times*, he said, not only failed to weigh the credibility of the information it was reporting, it succeeded, through its lack of skepticism on this issue, in amplifying the administration's position. As a result of the paper's reliance on another journalistic convention –

documented facts – public opinion and the substance of the national dialogue in the days leading up to the war may have been significantly impacted.

Rutten's comments were echoed by several others. Paul Janensch, for instance, said the foul-up was worse than the Jayson Blair scandal at the *Times* and the Jack Kelley scandal at *USA Today*. "News stories by serial fibbers Blair and Kelley were fabricated and plagiarized, but they did not support the justification for a war that has cost more than 800 American lives and thousands more Iraqi lives" (Janensch, 2004, ¶ 2). In this case, reporters and editors at *The New York Times* may have looked toward the objectivity ideal, but that ideal failed them when their search for truth could not be verified beyond the mouths of those who offered the information.

From Problems to Progress. The discussion of *The New York Times'* contribution to the press' credibility crisis reveals that the problems relate primarily to the coverage itself, to the acts of journalism. A leaning on questionable conventions, a shaky use of authority and a mistaken reliance on documented facts from official sources combined to shine the light on *The New York Times* – and U.S. journalism itself – as an institution in a state of disrepair. For a public whose distrust of the media is already at a dangerously high level – one that thinks of journalism as "a bottom-line-driven enterprise populated by the ethically challenged" (Jurkowitz, 2002, C1) – *The New York Times'* failures would seem to only exacerbate the crisis. But looking at the case only descriptively, only from the perspective of the problems it illuminated provides just one side of a more complex story. While the *Times* surely failed, it also made progress. This progress isn't seen in the particular act of reporting a story but rather in the continually evolving way that journalism views itself and how that view affects the relationship that

The New York Times – and by extension, that journalism as a whole – has with its public. The progress in this relationship, illustrated by three themes, takes the discussion into the normative realm and becomes the focus of the next section.

Illustrating the Progress:
Journalism's Movement Toward Reflection and Discourse

Increased Transparency. The editors' note disclosing flaws in the *Times'* Iraq coverage was not the first of its kind, but it was certainly one of the first. Four years earlier in 2000, the *Times* had run a similar assessment of its coverage of Wen Ho Lee, disclosing to readers that the paper had been instrumental in falsely accusing the suspected spy. This admission was the first of its kind and considered by many a remarkable act for an organization historically reticent to admit any kind of fallibility. This 2000 editors' statement was followed in 2003 by a lengthy explanation – on the paper's front page no less – of the problems created by Jayson Blair and his collection of fabricated and plagiarized reports for the paper.

This movement toward communicating with readers about the news process is a movement toward transparency and, normatively speaking, a step forward. As in the cases of Lee, Blair and the Iraq coverage, transparency in journalism can include explanations of news gathering and reporting gone wrong, but it more generally refers to the act of the press talking to its audiences about its decisions as well as the rationales and justifications that go into making those decisions. Transparency, as Rosen says, is "making it easy for ordinary readers to see for themselves and come to judgment" about what their papers do" (2004, ¶ 18).

As noted earlier, some media watchers argued that the *Times* editors only acted because others were criticizing the paper's Iraq coverage – just as the Wen Ho Lee coverage was criticized four years earlier. This step toward transparency, they said, was reactive rather than proactive. And according to Rosen, who wrote specifically about the transparency issue, there may have been a bit of face-saving going on in the editors' note. However, the reality in which *The New York Times* now operates is different than it was in 2000, and many changes at the paper tend toward encouraging transparency all on its own. From the introduction of an ombudsman, a standards editor and weblogs – all of which examine and debate what the newspaper does – to the necessity for the *Times* to rebuild its authority with both the public and the rest of the press after the Jayson Blair scandal, a new reality is pushing along a new era of transparency in a climate of greater scrutiny (Rosen, 2004).

While a good number of critics spent their time passing judgment on the *Times'* flawed coverage, some reacted to the note itself, to the attempt by the *Times* communicate with its readers. Paul Moore, for example, claimed that the editors' note should have been an article and should have appeared on the front page, but he also commended the *Times*, saying that "the newspaper's decision to publish the editors' note, even in its inconspicuous location, means it is accepting responsibility and trying to be accountable to its readers" (2004, 5C). Don Wycliff gave laurels to the *Times* for what he called an extraordinary editors' note. "The *Times* has not always been a leader in the movement to transparency in the news business," he said. "But with this editors' note on its Iraq coverage, the *Times* has established a wise precedent for all of us" (Wycliff, 2004, ¶ 12).

Wycliff makes a good point. Through its constantly shifting yet still tangible power, the *Times* sets the news agenda as well as the news telling agenda. The processes and practices in which the *Times* engages are adopted by other news organizations; the *Times* does still set the precedent. In 2000, following the *Times'* assessment of its Wen Ho Lee coverage, Rosen wrote a reaction piece for MediaChannel.org. He posted the piece again after the editors' note regarding the Iraq coverage appeared. Although four years old, the sentiments speak well to the *Times'* efforts and to the capacity the paper has for shifting the way in which the press as a whole relates to its audiences:

> My reaction when I read the editors' statement was this: why not do it every week or every day? Publishing continuous assessments would make the *Times* a leader in a different way, showing the rest of the news media what it means to examine yourself aggressively – that is, "without fear or favor"…Starting tomorrow, *The New York Times* could begin to speak more often, and with far greater candor, about is own performance – and find that its authority in the culture only grows as a result (Rosen, 2004, ¶ 52, 53).

The *Times* hasn't yet take Rosen up on his suggestion to publish self-assessments on a daily basis, but the 2004 editors' note – along with the Blair article in 2003 – does represent progress in the drive toward transparency. Anyone who supports transparency as a modern news convention would argue that it is crucial to a journalism practice that emphasizes the connection between the press and the public. And that connection, it would seem, is essential to the entire notion of a democratic press. As James Carey explains it:

> The god term of journalism – the be-all and end-all, the term without which the entire enterprise fails to make sense – is the public. Insofar as journalism is grounded, it is grounded in the public. Insofar as journalism has a client, the client is the public. The press justifies itself in the name of the public: It exists – or so it is regularly said – to inform the public, to serve as the extended eyes and ears of the public, to protect the public's right to know, to serve the public interest. The canons of journalism

> originate in and flow from the relationship of the press to the public. The public is totem and talisman, and an object of ritual homage (Carey, 1987, p. 5).

The problem, according to Carey, is that we have a press that justifies itself in the name of the public but pays the public no heed other than by viewing it as audience and consumer. Journalism is losing its critical connection to the public. Through efforts at transparency –flawed as they may be – the press can begin a conversation with the public that makes strides in rebuilding that relationship, that ever-so-important connection that justifies its very existence.

Increased Self-Criticism. The press as an institution has always paid lip service to the idea of being critiqued by outsiders, but the response to any actual act of criticism has been chilly. And while journalists have maintained that they should engage in self-criticism, the practice has never become fashionable. Historically, criticism from within has been viewed with almost as much contempt as criticism from without. In 1974, Carey made the following observation about press criticism.

> The very idea of criticism has become anathema to journalists, and the word itself has become a semantic beacon which unerringly attracts a host of emotional moths, some legitimate and some merely reflections of the psychology of the beleaguered…The subject of criticism has become rather too emotionally charged, and the press at its conventions and in its editorial pages is reacting with the grim-faced seriousness and beleaguered patriotism of Robert Taylor in the final scene of "Bataan" (Carey, 1974, p. 227).

Has anything changed since 1974? Is journalism as thin-skinned to criticism as it was 30 years ago? If the note from the *Times* editors – what is clearly an act of self-criticism – is any indication, perhaps a step forward has been made.

Many of those who responded to the editors' note recognized the step and commended it. Greg Easterbrook of *The New Republic* wrote in his column, "'I was wrong' are three of the hardest words to say. It is highly commendable that the *Times* has in effect said these words" (2004, ¶ 1). In doing so, Easterbrook continued, the *Times* admitted its fallibility and gave the public renewed reason to admire it. Edward Wasserman called the editors' note deeply impressive, a victory of professionalism, and a step toward reasserting moral leadership within a profession that badly needs it (2004). And Jack Shafer, the *Slate* writer who was one of the chief critics of the *Times'* coverage, said that while the *Times* editors may not have been as self-critical as they should have been, they did what a lot of publications wouldn't do. "They said, 'We published faulty stories. We wish we'd done a better job. And now we're going to devote ourselves to going back and correcting the record'" (Shafer cited in Kurtz, 2004, ¶ 99).

This act of self-criticism, Shafer maintained, is not something that only the *Times* should do, but an effort that the press as a whole should undertake. For Shafer, every news organization should have a column called "Previously Thought to be True" that would provide a place, a format and an expectation for discussion of any issue where the coverage was fundamentally in error and where the effort is made to correct the record and become more accountable (Shafer cited Kurtz, 2004, ¶ 140). This kind of effort, Shafer argued, recognizes that the press is a fallible institution made up of human beings who make mistakes. "I'm a great believer in a journalist's right to get it wrong," he said. "In order for the truth to be discovered, there has to be a lot of breathing room" (Shafer cited in Kurtz, 2004, ¶ 141).

But this breathing room should be monitored – by those from both within and outside the press – for all democratic institutions must be subjected to systematic critical analysis lest they "be controlled by censorship or corrupted by [their] own power and illusions" (Carey, 1974, p. 231). While *The New York Times*' steps toward self-criticism in the last four years represent progress toward an acceptance of at least one kind of criticism, one organization's efforts cannot carry the weight for all, even if that organization is the institution's figurehead and the one that sets the agenda for nearly every other news outlet in the country. All of the news media should try to recognize what the *Times* is, perhaps, beginning to understand – that continuous critical attention is not a "mark of failure or irrelevance" but rather "a sign or vigor and importance" (Carey, 1974, p. 240).

In this process of learning to be self-critical, news organizations surely won't get it all right, right away. Even those who lauded the *Times* editors' note as a fine act of self-criticism found its flaws. Most markedly, several responses to the note pointed out that it was "buried" on Page A10 (unlike many of the problematic stories, which ran on the front page).[ii] But criticism, like journalism itself, is the product of human endeavors. It may not always be done well, but doing it at all represents progress for an institution that has been throughout its history called "a wall of implacable arrogance" (Gladstone, 2004, ¶ 15).

Increased Recognition of Collective Agency. In its editors' note, the *Times* was deliberate about not placing blame on any individual reporter or editor for the flawed Iraq coverage. In fact, the editors spoke directly to critics who focused blame on individual reporters, saying the problem was more complicated: "Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper" ("From the Editors," 2004, Sec. 4 p. 2). In the eyes of the *Times*, the failure was an institutional one; and through the editors' note, it was the institution saying it made a mistake and the institution promising to set the record straight.

But the collective responsibility taken by the *Times* wasn't satisfactory to some of those who responded to the editors' note, and the reporters who wrote the Iraq stories – one, in particular – did not go unnamed for long. In newspaper columns, TV appearances, and radio interviews that ran in the week following the editors' note, Jack Shafer, Don Wycliff, Tim Rutten, Howard Kurtz, Paul Moore, Paul Janensch, Dan Kennedy and Daniel Okrent all named names, assuming, it seems, that someone in particular needed to shoulder the blame for the *Times'* failures. As Tim Rutten said in his column, the note was "novel in that it declined to name a single one of the reporters or editors who worked on the stories" (2004, p. E1). Like Rutten, Howard Kurtz found the lack of finger pointing unusual:

> How do you not name the reporter? I can't imagine *The New York Times* writing a story or an editors' note or correction about anybody working in a government agency or a corporation and writing around the fact that this was the person whose name was on, not all the stories, but some of the stories (2004, ¶ 118).

Michael Getler responded to Kurtz that naming the reporters – as well as the editors – would have added credibility to the disclosure (Getler cited in Kurtz, 2004). And Gene Foreman said he was "disappointed that the *Times* did not correct the record more prominently or name the journalists involved" (Foreman cited in Moore, 2004, 5C).

But why does credibility only come with outing particular individuals? In his CNN conversation with both Kurtz and Getler, Jack Shafer argued that names might be important to journalists but for most news consumers:

> what they're most interested in is the publication. And it was *The New York Times'* authority that's being called into question here, and it's *The*

> *New York Times* as an institution which is saying, 'Hey, we did it wrong. We're going back' (Shafer cited Kurtz, 2004, ¶ 124).

The debate about whether the *Times'* flawed coverage represents mistakes made by individuals or failings by an organization raises the issue of how both the press and the public view journalism and the organizations that engage in the practice. Is *The New York Times* – and by further extension, the social institution of the press – a kind of collective moral agent, or can agency only be attributed to those individuals who comprise the collective?

What would it mean if moral agency were granted to *The New York Times*? To the news media as a whole? Peter French, collective agency's leading advocate, argues that agency is the power of an actor, and an actor is one who 1) has the ability to act intentionally, 2) has the ability to make rational decisions and consider rational arguments, and 3) has the facility to respond to events and ethical criticism (Kerlin, 1997). Although an organization or an institution cannot normally function without the activities of human beings, the agency of that organization – or institution – and of those human beings is not identical (Kerlin, 1997). For French, the press can be fairly said to have agency because it has interests in doing those things that are likely to result in the realizations of its established goals, regardless of the transient self-interests of the individuals who comprise it (French, 1979).

Simply put, the institution is more than the sum of its individual parts, and the actions of that institution are the result of the relationships that characterize the institution, not the individuals that comprise it. For journalism particularly, this seems a useful way of conceptualizing moral responsibility. Reporters and editors come and go, but the credibility of an institution such as the press does not shift with simple personnel changes. The public isn't in the habit of blaming (or praising) reporters who write a piece, much less editors whose work is largely invisible. Putting out a newspaper is a team activity, and the results of that work represent the entire organization.

In this sense, the fact that the *Times* considered its failing a collective one represents progress toward an understanding that accountability – much less credibility – cannot be achieved through naming the wrongdoings of individual journalists. If journalism is a public trust, that trust is not granted to people but to the enterprise, and neither the credibility of that enterprise will be restored nor its function fulfilled by blaming individuals or simply discounting their work and replacing it with the work of others. A recognition by *The New York Times* that it is more than a group of individual journalists – that it is an integrated body with a collective identity – helps bring the organization's self-understanding more in line with the way in which members of the public perceive it. And a relationship – in this case, that between the press and the public – can only be made stronger when similar perceptions of that relationship are shared by both parties.

Conclusion:
Life After the Moral Mistake

The New York Times editors' note and the responses that it prompted represent continued evidence that American journalism is in the midst of a credibility crisis. Few would deny that *The New York Times* made mistakes in its coverage leading up to the war in Iraq, and the discourse surrounding these mistakes became symbolic of much that is wrong with journalism today. But what does life after the moral mistake look like – particularly when, in the midst of those mistakes, progress was also made toward a press that is more invested in its relationship with the public? In rudimentary terms, does this case represent a net gain or a net loss for journalism?

In reflecting on the themes that emerged from the case – both the problems and the progress – it becomes evident that the problems are found in the practice of news gathering and news telling, which results in news content. Progress, on the other hand, is represented not in the actual content but in more ontological considerations and in the reflection and discourse around the question: "What ought journalism be?" Whether on the whole the problems are more damaging or the progress more beneficial is yet to be fully determined, but it seems an opportunity exists for *The New York Times* – and the press as an institution – to both learn from its mistakes and capitalize on its steps forward.

The New York Times has started by recognizing its mistakes and disclosing them to a public who is owed a pledge of loyalty. This represents development toward moral accountability. In contemplating the mistakes, perhaps the *Times* and other news organizations can recognize the need for critique of what have become some of craft's most pervasive but problematic conventions – conventions that are contributing toward a growing crisis of credibility. And in contemplating the progress, the *Times* and other news organizations can begin to formulate a new vision for the press, a vision more suitable to the complexities of the modern day and to a landscape that is constantly in flux. This vision conceptualizes the press as:

- <u>More reflective</u> –an institution willing to be self-critical as well as accepting of outside criticism

- More transparent – an institution vested in dialogue, both within its own ranks as well as with members of the public
- More holistic – an institution that views itself in relational terms rather than individual terms
- More egalitarian – an institution that recognizes the media are something shared by all and one that treads carefully with its power
- More humble – an institution that views itself as a human endeavor – fallible but always striving to excel

Moral development theory contends that development progresses when an agent – either an individual or a collective – finds that its current modus operandi is inadequate for dealing with the intricacies of its situation. The situation in which *The New York Times* finds itself can be viewed as an opportunity for moral development. If the *Times* can take steps to confront the problems created by its flawed coverage while simultaneously capitalizing on opportunities for progress created by these problems, the press institution – spurred on by its flagship organization – can find renewed life after the moral mistake.

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Endnotes

[i] This claim is based on findings from "The State of the News Media 2004" conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. <www.stateofthenewsmedia.org> Retrieved September 20, 2004.

[ii] See, for example, citations for Okrent, Shafer, and Wasserman in this paper.