Outbreak of Fiction is Alarming News

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The Washington Post

June 29, 1998

A casual observer surveying the media landscape in recent weeks might be tempted to ask: What in tarnation is going on?

The New Republic fires a hot young writer for fabricating parts of 27 articles. The Boston Globe dumps a popular columnist for making up characters and quotes. CNN and Time come under hostile fire for a questionable report alleging that American troops once used nerve gas in Laos. And, in the latest embarrassment yesterday, the Cincinnati Enquirer fires a reporter, apologizes to Chiquita Brands for "deceitful, unethical and unlawful conduct" and agrees to pay the company more than $10 million.

Are these isolated incidents that just happened to erupt around the same time? Or do they suggest something larger about the journalistic culture?

One common theme in these mounting embarrassments is the desire to make a big splash in the roiling waters of media competition. Another is the failure of top news executives to heed warning signs until it's too late.

Take the case of Patricia Smith, the Globe columnist who has admitted making things up. Turns out that Globe editors first saw evidence that Smith was writing fiction nearly three years ago, but failed to act on it. There were, Assistant Managing Editor Walter Robinson told his paper, "a large number of columns" that he feared "contained falsehoods."

The problem, says Globe Editor Matthew Storin, is that similar questions had been raised about his star columnist, Mike Barnicle -- who, unlike Smith, is white.

"I had this very talented black woman. . . . How then can I take action against this woman under this circumstance?" Storin told his paper. He says he also knew of a decade-old incident in which the Chicago Sun-Times barred Smith from writing for months after she didn't pick up her press pass to an Elton John concert and made mistakes in her review. (Smith maintained she attended the concert.)

Storin ordered a review procedure for all Metro section columnists that ultimately led to Smith's downfall. But Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz has charged the paper with a racial "double standard," saying the Globe failed to discipline Barnicle for what Dershowitz contends was a phony quote attributed to him. Storin says his staff has reviewed 364 Barnicle columns and found them factual.

Smith apologized for her conduct, but many Globe staffers saw her farewell column as defiant.
"To those colleagues and readers who salivated daily at the thought of my head on a platter, congrats," she wrote.

At the New Republic, the imaginary screeds of writer Stephen Glass have been well chronicled. But it is still stunning that some of his more outlandish creations -- from the First Church of George Herbert Walker Christ to a conservative conference depicted as a drug-addled Animal House -- were not detected sooner, given the buzz about Glass's too-perfect anecdotes.

The New Republic had plenty of company. In an editor's note in George magazine, John F. Kennedy Jr. regretted publishing Glass's falsehoods: "It is important that you understand our commitment to ensuring that this sort of breakdown does not happen again."

Policy Review, the Heritage Foundation's magazine, has also retracted a 1997 Glass piece. Glass quoted a Texas woman named Wendy Colehill giving a dramatic speech at the grave of her husband, Bill, thanking God for their privatized Social Security plan. Editor Adam Meyerson says there is no evidence the Colehills exist.

The CNN-Time report on nerve gas is equally troubling. CNN's own military analyst, retired Maj. Gen. Perry Smith, warned it was flawed, and several people involved in the 1970 Laos mission have come forward to challenge it. The larger question is whether CNN's "NewsStand" deliberately left out information that would refute or undercut its thesis.

The Weekly Standard says Eugene McCarley, the Army captain who led the operation, was angry at the way his quotes were edited. He said he told CNN producer April Oliver "a thousand times that poison gas was not used. I told them over and over that it's just preposterous." CNN quoted McCarley as saying the military "might" have had such gases available.

Platoon leader Robert Van Buskirk told CNN he ordered the use of nerve gas and killed two U.S. defectors with a grenade. But CNN did not report that Van Buskirk made no mention of these events in a 1983 book on the operation (he says he repressed the memories). Van Buskirk told the Washington Times he was not CNN's source for the use of nerve gas or the killing of dozens of civilians and that he is "a little bit dismayed with how the story came out."

The program said retired Adm. Thomas Moorer had confirmed the use of nerve gas, although he didn't say so on camera. Moorer, who is 86 and living in a nursing home, said afterward that he "had no independent knowledge" of nerve gas use and "didn't confirm it." Time and CNN are now investigating their own story.

In the Cincinnati case, the Enquirer's editor and publisher said in a front-page story yesterday that the paper had fired reporter Mike Gallagher for "theft" in procuring voice-mail information from Chiquita Brands that he claimed was provided by a high-ranking executive. The paper retracted what it called "untrue" allegations in a May 3 report on Chiquita's business practices in Central America and said it would run a prominent Page 1 apology for three days. Gallagher has hired a lawyer and will not discuss his techniques.
It's easy to forget that 99 percent of journalists are honest and hard-working. But such high-profile embarrassments have a way of lingering in the public mind.

Tick Tick Tick . . .

It's all but official: Jeff Fager will become executive producer of what's now being called "60 Minutes II." Fager's move will leave a gaping hole at "CBS Evening News," which has climbed to second place during his tenure there as executive producer. But the CBS brass, which talked "60" honcho Don Hewitt into overseeing the new weekday edition, wants Fager, so Dan Rather & Co. will have to look elsewhere.

Double Exposure

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) is ubiquitous in the press these days -- a little too ubiquitous for the Wall Street Journal. A top editor called McCain's spokeswoman to complain that his Journal op-ed piece on the defeat of his tobacco bill bore a striking resemblance to his Washington Post piece the same day. "It's a question of having pitched two similar pieces to two different newspapers at the same time," said Journal spokesman Richard Tofel. "We would have preferred to know." McCain's office apologized to the Journal for what it called a staff foul-up.

Olbermann Overdoses

Some critics say MSNBC has gone overboard on the Monica Lewinsky story. One of them is Keith Olbermann, who anchors two hours of scandal coverage each night.

In a commencement address last month at Cornell University, the irreverent anchor said: "My network starts covering this story 28 hours out of every 24, and six days after the story breaks more people watch my show than watch my old show, {ESPN's} `SportsCenter.' . . . I'm having the dry heaves in the bathroom because my moral sensor is going off but I can't even hear it, I'm so seduced by these ratings."

Recently, he added, "I awakened from my stupor on this subject and told my employers that I simply could not continue doing this show about the endless investigation. . . . I had to choose what I felt in my heart was right over what I felt in my wallet was smart. . . . I await their answer."

MSNBC spokeswoman Maria Battaglia said that "Keith is a great skeptic. He loves to hold people's feet to the fire, including ours." She said the network, like all news outlets, "is struggling with how much to cover this story."