

# A FRAGILE TRUST

Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at the New York Times

*a film by Samantha Grant*



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## RIGHTS:

US Domestic Broadcast: PBS  
All other territories available

A FRAGILE TRUST Press Kit  
Dir/Prod Samantha Grant

## SYNOPSIS:

### Logline (37 words):

A FRAGILE TRUST tells the shocking story of Jayson Blair, the most infamous serial plagiarist of our time, and how he unleashed the massive scandal that rocked the New York Times and the entire world of journalism.



### Short Version (100 words):

A FRAGILE TRUST tells the shocking story of Jayson Blair, the most infamous serial plagiarist of our time, and how he unleashed the massive scandal that rocked the New York Times and the entire world of journalism. The story of “The Blair Affair” is both a compelling, character-driven narrative about an important chapter in the history of journalism, and a complex story about power, ethics, representation, race, and

accountability in the mainstream media. Featuring exclusive interviews, including Blair himself, A FRAGILE TRUST is the first film to tell the whole sordid story of the scandal while exploring these deeper themes.

### Medium Version (346 words):

A FRAGILE TRUST tells the shocking story of Jayson Blair, the most infamous serial plagiarist of our time, and how he unleashed the massive scandal that rocked the New York Times and the entire world of journalism. In 2003 Blair was caught plagiarizing the work of other reporters and supplementing his own reporting with fabricated details in dozens of different stories published in the *Times*. The ensuing media frenzy left a major blemish on the history of the ‘Old Grey Lady’, which just a year earlier won a record 7 Pulitzer prizes for its coverage of 9/11. It was a spectacular fall for both Blair and the paper. The daily operations of the *Times* newsroom became a public spectacle as every major news outlet picked up the story and ran with it. The fact that Blair is African-American was emphasized again and again as accounts of the ‘Blair Affair’ served up sordid details in a soap-opera style tale of deception, drug abuse, racism, mental illness, hierarchy, white guilt, and power struggles inside the hallowed halls of the *New York Times*.

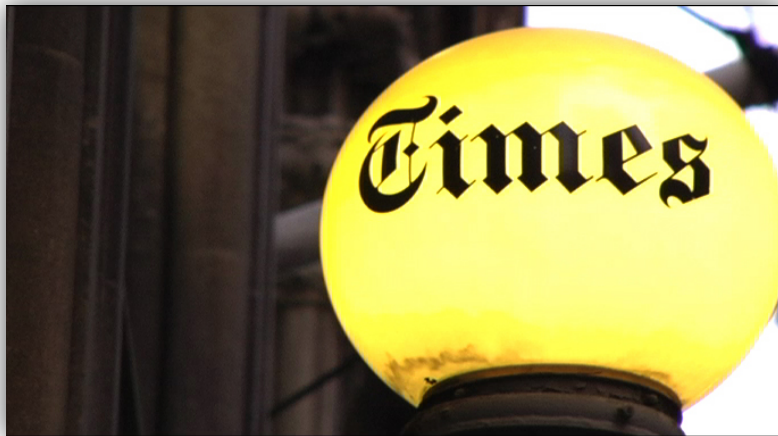
Through the course of the film, we follow Blair as he slowly unravels in the face of mounting pressures and distractions. Starting with his ‘reporting’ of the plagiarized article that ultimately lead to his undoing, we trace the rise and fall of this fascinating young reporter as he clings to his career at the *Times* even as he is losing his mind.

The Jayson Blair scandal is at the most basic level a compelling, character-driven narrative about an important chapter in the history of journalism. It is also a complex story about power, ethics, representation, race, and accountability in the mainstream media. Featuring exclusive interviews with everyone involved, including former Executive Editor Howell Raines and Blair himself, A FRAGILE TRUST

is the first film to tell the whole sordid story of the scandal while exploring these deeper themes. With more and more publications moving to online-only formats and plagiarism on the rise, this cautionary tale about the slippery slope of ethical transgressions is more relevant than ever.

**Long Version (505 words):**

A FRAGILE TRUST is a feature documentary that tells the shocking story of Jayson Blair, the most infamous serial plagiarist of our time, and how he unleashed the massive scandal that rocked the New York Times and the entire world of journalism. In 2003 Blair was caught plagiarizing the work of other reporters and supplementing his own reporting with fabricated details in dozens of stories published in the *Times*. The ensuing media frenzy left a major blemish on the history of the “Old Grey Lady,” which just a year earlier had won a record seven Pulitzer Prizes for its coverage of 9/11. It was a spectacular fall from grace for both Blair and the paper. The daily operations of the *Times* newsroom became a public spectacle as every major news outlet picked up the story. The fact that Blair is African-American was emphasized again and again as accounts of the “Blair Affair” served up sordid details in a soap-opera style tale of deception, drug abuse, racism, mental illness, hierarchy, white guilt, and power struggles inside the hallowed halls of the *Times*. Accusations of favoritism, lowered standards for



minorities, and an editor gone rogue were hotly debated by pundits while minority journalists everywhere said they felt as if they were suddenly targeted because of Blair’s flagrant lies. Ultimately, the scandal resulted in new management at the Times, some system-wide changes in how all newsrooms do business, and a suicide attempt by Blair. A FRAGILE TRUST unpacks the teachable moments in the Jayson Blair/*New York Times* saga, thereby giving

viewers a framework with which to think about these sensitive and complicated issues in the context of journalism and beyond.

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The Jayson Blair scandal is at the most basic level a compelling, character-driven narrative about an important chapter in the history of journalism. It is also a complex and multi-layered story about power, ethics, representation, race, and accountability in the mainstream media. Featuring exclusive interviews with everyone involved, A FRAGILE TRUST is the first film to tell the whole sordid story of the scandal while exploring these deeper themes.

Blair’s exclusive interview for A FRAGILE TRUST represents the first time he has spoken about his actions at the *Times* since the weeks immediately following the scandal in 2003. In addition, Blair has provided unprecedented access to his notes, reflections, and even his private email account from the

months leading up to the discovery of the scandal. When asked why he agreed to participate in the project he wrote, "I became convinced that while the documentary would hardly be flattering to me, it would provide the depth that would answer some questions that people had, including me."

With more and more publications moving to online-only formats and plagiarism on the rise, this cautionary tale about the slippery slope of ethical transgressions is more relevant than ever.

## CREDITS

Producer/Director	Samantha Grant
Co-Producer	Brittney Shepherd
Editor	Richard Levien
Writer	Samantha Grant, Richard Levien
Cinematographer	Singeli Agnew, Samantha Grant
Composer	Justin Melland
Associate Producer	Jessica Jones
Animator	Mike Nicholson, Picturebox
Color Finisher	Gary Coates
Sound Mix	Philip Perkins

## KEY PERSONNEL BIO

**Samantha Grant (Director/Producer)** is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, journalist, and educator. Her approach to storytelling is influenced by both her undergraduate degree in American Studies/Literature from Yale University and her Master's of Journalism degree from the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Through her San Francisco based production company GUSH productions, Sam has created work for clients including MTV, ABC, PBS, CNN, NPR, FRONTLINE, FRONTLINE/World, and Al Jazeera International. In 2007, Sam was named a Carnegie/Knight fellow as



part of the News 21 Initiative on the Future of Journalism and in 2011, Sam was named a BAVC MediaMaker Fellow, where she began work on the robust transmedia companion project for A FRAGILE TRUST. Currently, Sam is creating the Educational Alternate Reality Game DECISIONS ON DEADLINE, which teaches journalism ethics through an interactive and entertaining experience. Sam is also the DP/Producer of the upcoming feature documentary GIRLS IN THE FOREST, which tells the story of a revolutionary girls high school being built in one of the last pristine forests in South America. When she's not shooting or producing independent documentaries, you can find Sam lecturing at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism and

Stanford's Knight Fellowship program.

Company Website: <http://www.gushproductions.com>



**Brittney Shepherd (Co-Producer)** is a San Francisco-based independent filmmaker. Currently, Brittney is co-producing *OUT RUN* (dir: Johnny Symons and S. Leo Chiang), the new feature documentary about a gay Kenyan activist and a transgender Filipina pioneer campaigning to become the first openly LGBT elected officials in their respective countries. She is also the co-creator of the ITVS-funded news transmedia game, *Decisions on Deadline*. Brittney was the associate producer on Emmy-nominated film *A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES* (ITVS), and *MR. CAO GOES TO WASHINGTON* (CAAM). Brittney is the former staff producer at GroundSpark, where she produced award-winning films alongside the Academy-Award winning director Debra Chasnoff, including *CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF DEL MARTIN* and *STRAIGHTLACED*. Brittney holds a B.A. from UC Berkeley in Ethnic Studies.



**Richard Levien (Editor)** has a PhD in theoretical physics from Princeton University, but has found his real passion in film. As a freelance film editor, he co-edited the feature documentary *D Tour*, which won the Golden Gate award for Best Bay Area documentary at the 2009 SF International Film Festival (Independent Lens, 2009). He edited the short film *Remigration* (Dir: Barry Jenkins, "Medicine for Melancholy") which premiered at SxSW and appeared in the ITVS web series "Future States", and edited and did motion graphics for "On the Assassination of the President" which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2008.



**Jessica Jones (Associate Producer)** Jessica Jones is a filmmaker and independent media producer specializing in documentary style video productions. She holds a B.A. from Northwestern University in Psychology and International Studies, and is a graduate of George Washington University's Institute for Documentary Filmmaking. With a background in both film and nonprofit advocacy, Jessica views visual storytelling as a unique platform for social innovation, and intends to use filmmaking as an opportunity to shed light on community based issues. She is a 2013 BAVC MediaMaker Fellow, and was the 2011 George Stoney Fellow at Working Films.



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### **Justin Melland (Composer)**

With over 30 feature and documentary film credits to his name, Justin Melland has become known for his wonderfully eclectic scores and his constant use of LA's finest studio musicians, which always elevate his music to the highest level of quality. After finishing his Master's Degree in music composition at UCLA and UC Berkeley, one of his first composing positions was to write an original score for "The Death of Kevin Carter, Casualty of the Bang Bang Club" which was nominated in 2006 for an Oscar® by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and is distributed by HBO. In addition to his very full film composing schedule, he has also written the scores for seven successful television series: "Live Through This" (Fuse), "Inside" (National Geographic/PBS), "Undercover History" (National Geographic), "City Confidential" (A&E), "Frontline/WORLD" (PBS, Discovery/Times), The Human

Weapon (History) and "Snapped" (oxygen).