June 23, 2005

Assuring Our Credibility

Bill Keller has responded to the Credibility Committee's report with a variety of measures.

Colleagues,

When we posted the report of the Credibility Committee a few weeks ago, I described it as a blueprint. Consider this phase one of construction. After mulling comments from many of you and discussing this with the masthead and department heads, I'm ready to identify a number of measures we should move on now. Al Siegal, for his sins, will be in charge of overseeing the implementation of these measures, although in some cases other editors have been assigned specific responsibilities.

The Times has two assets that distinguish us and give us our authority in the eyes of discerning readers: We have the best newsgathering staff in the world, and we have a code of professional standards — standards of accuracy, impartial judgment, fairness and accountability — that we take seriously. What the committee has proposed is a reaffirmation of those high standards, greater discipline in upholding them, and a redoubled effort to make sure the public understands how deeply to believe in them.

A Dialogue With Our Publics

There may have been a time when we could remain aloof and impervious in the face of criticism, but if so that time has passed. The proliferation of critics and the growing public cynicism about the news media pose a threat to our authority and credibility that cannot go unanswered. The challenge, as the committee was well aware, is to answer it without being distracted from our journalistic work, and without seeming defensive or self-absorbed and self-promotional.

The committee's recommendations arrived, coincidentally, at a time when a new Public Editor, Barney Calame, is taking over, with a stated aim of making his own Op-Ed column more explanatory in form. He declared in his first column that he intends to devote more of his space in the paper and on line to questioning editors (and reporters) about the decisions we make on coverage. That does not obviate the value of the paper's leaders speaking with our own voice, but it means we will probably be delivering readers a heftier dose of how-the-place-works even without enlisting editors in a new forum. With that in mind, I'd like to begin with the following steps:

• On a regular basis — every other week — senior editors of The Times will be available to the public for Q & A forums on our website. (These will not be live, raw chat sessions, but thoughtful answers to serious questions.) "Senior" means department heads on up to the executive editor, who herewith volunteers to take the first turn. We will announce these sessions in the paper and on the Website. We will designate someone at the Website to handle logistics, and someone in the newsroom to play choreographer.

• We will be more systematic in responding to public attacks on our work. When there is a significant or concerted impugning of something we have reported whether the complaints come to us in critiques published elsewhere, from the Internet, from readers or through the company spokesman's office the first responsibility for alerting us and recommending how to respond will reside with the department head, in consultation with Al Siegal. Al will serve as the clearinghouse for such complaints, will keep Jill and me informed, and will decide when an attack on our credibility merits a higher level of response.

• Bill Schmidt and Neil Amdur have already taken charge of coordinating public appearances by Times staffers. They are already overseeing requests from colleges and other public venues, matching the requests with volunteer speakers, and putting together a packet of background information about The Times so that staffers who go out in public will have an idea of questions to expect. I have asked Bill and Neil to expand their orbit a little and serve as a clearinghouse for appearances organized by the promotions department and the communications department as well. We encourage those staffers who have the time and inclination to take opportunities to meet public groups — assuming the forum is appropriate and the staffers are comfortable doing so. Nothing builds respect for the work we do like hearing from the talented people who do it.

• We have nothing against TV and radio — in fact, we produce both, and expect to do more. But when we are guests on TV and radio talk shows, we carry considerable responsibility for the credibility of the paper as a whole, and we should not take these appearances lightly. The paper's ethics guidelines already establish a policy for appearances on TV and radio. We avoid shows that are designed for gladiatorial combat rather than enlightenment; when we go on television, we are bound by the same rules of impartiality that govern our work in the news pages: we do not opine, we do not predict. To the existing policy, I will add two amendments:

First, reporters and other staffers are expected to consult supervisors before accepting an invitation to appear on TV or radio. We understand that sometimes this will not be feasible when, for example, NPR calls a correspondent in Baghdad for a spot conversation about breaking news but even in those cases we would appreciate an e-mail after the fact. When in doubt about whether an appearance requires permission, ask your department head or Al Siegal.

Second, we will make available training in the basics of television to reporters or editors who want to be more comfortable in the medium. Jane Bornemeier in our TV unit will be the point of contact for those interested in some basic coaching.

Reaching Out to Readers, Improving Our Use of Sources

We have been more wary than most major newspapers about giving our readers direct access to reporters. There are valid reasons for this: an accessible address opens a reporter to spam, crude personal attacks and orchestrated campaigns that are easy to organize on the Web but can be terribly time-consuming for a reporter on the receiving end. The price of our inaccessibility, though, is that we may send a message of indifference. And e-mail access opens up another avenue for reporters and editors to get ideas and tips that can lead to stories. As the committee points out, technology offers us a sensible compromise: easy access to reporters who are willing to give it.

• I have asked Terry Schwadron, in consultation with Al, to oversee the introduction of Web links that will allow readers of Times articles on-line to contact the authors. As recommended by the committee, we will give readers access to "dialogue boxes" that allow them to send a message to a reporter without disclosing the reporter’s actual e-mail address. While we will encourage all reporters to use this system, we will offer any reporter the option to decline. Those who are concerned about the quantity (or vitriol) of reader e-mail will have the option of not using it. In that case, incoming e-mail will be acknowledged with a polite electronic form letter and automatically forwarded to a departmental mailbox. Someone will be assigned to screen departmental mail for legitimate complaints. We will put this system into effect as soon as I am convinced the technology is reliable. We will prepare and circulate guidelines to help staff deal with e-mail, including a clear statement that no one is expected to answer every message.

• We will make clear in our training programs (and I want to make clear here) that we encourage reporters to double-check their facts and conclusions with sources, to the extent that time allows. We also recommend that reporters informally invite feedback from sources after stories have appeared.

Avoiding mistakes, as the committee pointed out, is far better than correcting them. One way of reducing errors of fact or interpretation is to check back with sources, repeatedly if necessary, before an article goes to press. While this practice is routine at some newspapers — and is used by some of the best Times reporters — a surprising number of staffers seem to believe that it violates an occupational taboo. In fact, it is a valuable safeguard of accuracy, and it reassures sources that you are scrupulous.

It will be up to individual reporters to determine whether, and how, to double-check information. Some reporters work methodically through a story, like magazine fact-checkers, verifying facts, paraphrasing the gist of quotes, testing their analytical points. Others employ a more casual system of spot checks, or call only when they feel less than certain. I have asked Al to work with a few members of the committee to draft guidelines, spelling out a range of techniques and options, to be incorporated in our training and orientation materials.

"Whatever the technique," as the committee said, "the reporter must make it clear from the start that he or she keeps control of the story, and that the process does not open the door for the source to edit quotations or demand in retrospect that something be moved off the record."

Unidentified Sources: Some Next Steps

Our policy on anonymous sources is a good one, and bears repeating. It begins: "We resist granting anonymity except as a last resort to obtain information that we believe to be newsworthy and reliable." The information should be of compelling interest, and unobtainable by other means. We resist granting anonymity for opinion, speculation or personal attacks.

The idea that a news organization can conduct serious, aggressive journalistic inquiry without the use of anonymous sources is a fantasy. Some areas of coverage, notably involving national security, intelligence or sensitive diplomacy, and stories that reflect dissent within governments, companies and other institutions, necessarily depend on the ability to protect sources. The problem is, the credibility of those necessarily anonymous sources — and of our work — is undermined by the casual use of unnamed sources where no such protection is called for. We have taken several steps over the past year or two to tighten our policy on anonymous sources, and in keeping with the committee's recommendations we intend to reinforce them.

The responsibility to be vigilant about unnamed sourcing begins with the reporter and runs all the way up to the News Desk.

• Reporters must be more aggressive in pressing sources to put information on the record. We will give greater emphasis and attention to this in training and orientation programs. The committee noted in particular a shortage of practical guidance on how to persuade reticent sources to put information on the record. I have asked Al to draw on the committee's research and prepare a primer on techniques that some of our colleagues have found effective. These suggestions will be incorporated in orientation and training materials, and will be made available on the in-house website.

• I have asked Al to assure that every desk has a clear procedure for impressing upon editors their responsibilities in the realm of anonymous sourcing: that (under a policy spelled out last year) an editor must know the identity of any unnamed source, that editors must press reporters to get information on the record, and that when anonymity is unavoidable editors must press for adequate disclosure — how the sources know what they know, what motivated them to share the information, and why they are entitled to anonymity. (Note: Not why they ASK for anonymity, but why we feel they are entitled to it.)

• Department heads must be prepared, in some cases, to hold back stories — even competitive stories — if the sourcing does not meet our standards. When in doubt, feel free to consult with a senior editor (Rick, Craig or Marty) or with me or Jill.

• Probably the single greatest purveyor of anonymous information is the U.S. Government (which can also be the loudest complainer about anonymous reporting.) We will continue to push, as the Washington Bureau has recently been doing, to put more official briefings on the record. It is patently silly for a Government spokesman, whose job is to articulate official policy, to brief a room full of reporters anonymously. At the same time, at least in the case of official briefings the reader knows who is ultimately accountable for this information - the Administration that authorized the briefing. I agree with the committee that we have little to gain by unilaterally walking out of off-the-record briefings, but we can set the bar higher for whether such briefings are newsworthy.

Just to be clear, this policy and these practices are to apply across all sections of the paper, from sports to government affairs, in features as well as hard news, in staff-written and freelance coverage.

Sourcing is an area where progress will be measured in increments, and subjectively. There is no reliable statistic that will tell us whether we are being sufficiently vigilant. But here's my subjective standard of success: A year from now, I would like reporters to feel that the use of anonymous sources is not a routine, but an exception, and that if the justification is not clear in the story they will be challenged. A year from now, I would like every backfielder and copy editor to feel it is a right and a responsibility to challenge the use of an unnamed source when it does not measure up to our standards. I would like this to be central in our orientation of new reporters and editors, and a critical component in our mid-career training workshops. I would like care in the use of anonymous sources to be one of the criteria used in evaluating the work of reporters and editors.

Reducing Factual Errors

It's amazing that some people at this paper believe fact-checking is someone else's responsibility. It is not. Accuracy is everyone's responsibility. Let's begin by being absolutely clear about this:

Writers, you are responsible for the accuracy of every fact in your copy — the spelling of names, the date of an event, the accuracy of an address, every fact. No writer at The Times is exempt from this. Backfield editors, you are responsible for overall accuracy and fairness, and for enforcing standards. Copy editors, you should check verifiable error-prone facts as time allows and consult with writers about all factual changes.

Writers are expected to read edited copies of their stories, as well as headlines, captions, graphics and related elements when practicable. (I understand that in a deadline business, it is often not practicable.) Editors should send this material by e-mail to reporters who are not in a position to readily access the system.

All staff members have a duty to notify a responsible editor of any possible errors in copy, before or after publication in print or on the Web. Sometimes sources will call a reporter to point out a mistake in a story, but will not request a correction. This does NOT absolve the reporter of the obligation to report the error and have it corrected. Mistakes that are not corrected live on in the archives, and get repeated in subsequent stories.

Here are some other measures we will be taking to shore up our accuracy:

• As recommended by the committee, we will set up a newsroom-wide corrections tracking system to detect patterns of errors and take action to avoid repetition. I have asked Al and Terry Schwadron to consult with several of our departments that already have formal error-tracking systems (Metro, Bizday and Culture among them), to recommend an integrated system, and to nominate an editor to oversee it and to prepare occasional memos or intranet postings about accuracy.

Please note that our existing corrections databases have not been, and our integrated database will not be, used to compile error counts or rates for individual reporters. As the committee notes, raw counts of individual errors can be simplistic and misleading, and turning this system into an occupational scorecard would reduce reporters' incentive to disclose mistakes. Accuracy will continue to be a legitimate subject for discussion in performance reviews, of course, but the approach to the subject should not be blindly numeric. Only masthead editors, department heads and the editor in charge of the database will have access to names in the database.

• I have asked Al (with whatever help he needs from Terry Schwadron or others) to compile a directory of electronic fact-checking tools we deem to be useful and reliable. Instruction on the use of these tools will be available on the Intranet, and included in our training programs.

• We will make it easier for readers to reach us with complaints about errors. I have asked Al to see that we post clearer instructions about the complaint process in the

"Tomorrow" box, and to work with the website to provide a simple form or dialogue box to walk readers through the complaint process.

• I have asked Al to consult with Len Apcar to make sure that corrections are posted as promptly as possible on Web versions of our stories, and that the website make a routine practice of promptly substituting the final New York print version of news stories in place of earlier versions.

The News/Opinion Divide

Even sophisticated readers of The New York Times sometimes find it hard to distinguish between news coverage and commentary in our pages. While The Times is and always will be a forum for opinion and argument as well as a source of impartial news coverage, we should make the distinction as clear as possible.

• I have asked Tom Bodkin to head a small working group of reporters and editors to devise standardized formats for news analysis and other reportorial formats that are authorized to carry voice and viewpoint. We can do more than we presently do, with rubrics and layouts and other devices, to give readers clear signals that a column is different from a news analysis is different from a critic’s notebook is different from a news story.

• We must, as the committee says, be more alert to nuances of language when writing about contentious issues. The committee picked a few examples — the way the word "moderate" conveys a judgment about which views are sensible and which are extreme, the misuse of "religious fundamentalists" to describe religious conservatives — but there are many pitfalls involved when we try to convey complex ideas as simply as possible, on deadline. I’ve asked Al (the last item on poor Al’s check list) to assure that our training and orientation include sessions with reporters who have proven particularly skillful at avoiding these pitfalls, and also to report periodically to the staff on language issues that have been brought to his attention.

• In addition to being a daily newspaper, we are a collection of magazines — actual magazines, and weekly sections that are magazine-like in their formats, their tone, their license to comment, not to mention their heavy reliance on freelance writers. My own view which I know is shared by the editors of the Magazine and the magazine-like sections — is that the standards of accuracy and fairness must be equally exacting across the contents of the paper. At the same time, the daily sections can learn some things from the Magazine, for example, about portraying religious conservatives in an interesting and three-dimensional way. I have asked Rick Berke to organize periodic meetings of small groups of editors and writers from the Magazine and the core news report to talk about how we uphold the highest standards of fairness and accuracy while producing the most compelling journalism we can.

A Broader Definition of Diversity

"Our paper's commitment to a diversity of gender, race and ethnicity is nonnegotiable," the committee writes. "We should pursue the same diversity in other dimensions of life, and for the same reason - to ensure a broad range of viewpoints is at the table when we decide what to write about and how to present it. The executive editor should assign this goal to everyone who has a hand in recruiting."

I embrace this recommendation wholeheartedly. The point is not that we should begin recruiting reporters and editors for their political outlook; it is part of our professional code that we keep our political views out of the paper. The point is that we want a range of experience. We have a recruiting committee that tracks promising outside candidates, and that committee has already begun to consider ways to enrich the variety of backgrounds of our reporters and editors. First and foremost we hire the best reporters, editors, photographers and artists in the business. But we will make an extra effort to focus on diversity of religious upbringing and military experience, of region and class.

Of course, diversifying the range of viewpoints reported — and understood — in our pages is not mainly a matter of hiring a more diverse work force. It calls for a concerted effort by all of us to stretch beyond our predominantly urban, culturally liberal orientation, to cover the full range of our national conversation. This is second nature for many of our reporters, especially on the national staff, and there have been some exceptional successes — the coverage of conservatives by David Kirkpatrick (including the splendid piece on evangelicals in the class series) and Jason DeParle, and a number of recent Magazine pieces. I intend to keep pushing us in this direction.

I also endorse the committee's recommendation that we cover religion more extensively, but I think the key to that is not to add more reporters who will write about religion as a beat. I think the key is to be more alert to the role religion plays in many stories we cover, stories of politics and policy, national and local, stories of social trends and family life, stories of how we live. This is important to us not because we want to appease believers or pander to conservatives, but because good journalism entails understanding more than just the neighborhood you grew up in.

This is not the end of the conversation. But it is, you will be relieved to learn, the end of this manifesto.

Bill Keller