

1991

## Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 55

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### Recommended Citation

"Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 55" (1991). *Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991)*. Paper 75.  
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# Recycling in the Newsroom

Plagiarism at two major dailies raises anew the issue of a newspaper's implicit contract with its readers

Every schoolchild is taught the impropriety of claiming credit for someone else's work. But in adult life, the rules on plagiarism are often hazily understood, even by those whose trade is to point the finger. Within a six-day span this month, the nation's two leading dailies, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, confessed to plagiarizing stories from rival papers and disciplined the guilty reporters, while the journalism school at Boston University replaced its dean, H. Joachim Maître, after he lifted much of his commencement speech from an obscure journal.

Officials at all three institutions assured the public that these were isolated episodes. But the misdeeds by the reporters from the *Times* and the *Post* were simply more extreme examples of corner-cutting practices that are becoming regrettably common. Technology provides ever easier access to other journalists' stories. Financial pressures impel sheer productivity. Reporters see career advancement coming through literary stylishness or Watergate-type exposés instead of nuts-and-bolts checking. And editors at even the most prominent places increasingly call themselves "packagers" rather than seekers of news. Thus it is scant surprise that even experienced reporters make bad judgments.

Fox Butterfield of the *Times* went awry, ironically, in reporting the Maître plagiarism flap. After the story broke in the *Boston Globe*, he retold it in a next-day version, more elegantly written and with some fresh reporting. But Butterfield had no reason to



TOM LUIE/VOICER TIME

doubt the accuracy of the quotes in the *Globe*. So instead of buying a videotape of Maître's speech, as the article implied he had, he took the quicker route of plucking the words straight from the daily. He also borrowed the *Globe's* choices for side-by-side comparisons of passages by Maître and PBS film critic Michael Medved. Butterfield presumably reasoned his time would be better spent advancing the story by pursuing new information. Instead, he was publicly

rebuked in a *Times* Editors' Note: he declined interviews last week while reportedly on a one-week suspension.

Laura Parker, chief of the *Washington Post's* Miami bureau, took the shortcut principle even further in filing a piece about mosquito and grasshopper infestations in Florida. She lifted most of her reporting from stories by the *Miami Herald* and the Associated Press, including direct quotations from people she had not interviewed. She presumably saw little point in the donkey work of calling the quoted sources, or hunting up counterparts, to provide innocuous remarks. In the mind of her editors, however, she broke an implicit contract with the reader, in which the newspaper vouches that all its facts, especially those surrounded by quotation marks, have been checked for accuracy by the newspaper itself. So they fired her. Parker declined to comment beyond a prepared statement: "I made a mistake, which I deeply regret. My integrity and ethics have never been questioned in my 16 years in journalism, and I think I was very harshly punished."

Whenever a news organ disciplines a reporter, cynics suggest that management is seeking a public relations gesture, a formal rooting out of sin. But the issue is the First Amendment bond with the public. Plagiarism imperils that bond, not because it involves theft of a wry phrase or piquant quote, but because it devalues meticulous, independent verification of fact—the bedrock of a press worth reading.

—By William A. Henry III.

With reporting by Minal Hajratwala/*New York*

## Ideas

### The Bonfire of The Nominee

Carol Iannone loses a round to political correctness

On one side were such conservative heavyweights as Vice President Dan Quayle, columnist William Buckley and Lynne Cheney, chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Lined up in opposition was an imposing array of scholarly dreadnoughts, including the Modern Language Association of America and the American Council of Learned Societies. At issue was the nomination of Carol Iannone,

43, a conservative literary critic, to the NEH's 26-member National Council, which advises the endowment on spending its budget (for 1992: \$170 million).

Score one for the politically correct. After an intense debate last week, the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee voted 9 to 8, largely along partisan lines, to scuttle the nomination. Echoing Iannone's academic foes, Senator Edward Kennedy contended that her scholarly credentials were too feeble to justify promotion to the council, whose charter requires members with records of scholarship or creativity.

A respected teacher of literature at New York University, Iannone earned her Ph.D. at the State University of New York at Stony Brook with a 1981 dissertation that was sharply critical of feminism. As

her critics note, Iannone has published little scholarly work since then. But that may have been less relevant to her nomination's fate than the currently unfashionable quality of her critical reviews, many of which have appeared in the conservative monthly *Commentary*. In March she argued that a signal reason why so many top prizes had been awarded to recent novels by Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker was not literary merit but the fact that the authors were female and black. Meanwhile, the Senators approved without debate two political scientists who have written extensively for conservative journals. To judge by their scholarly publications, neither Harvard's Harvey Mansfield nor Michael Malbin of SUNY's Albany campus has ever challenged any favoritism allegedly accorded black writers. ■