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Times business columnist resigns over plagiarism

By **Michael R. Fancher**
Seattle Times executive editor

Stephen H. Dunphy, Seattle Times associate editor and business columnist, has resigned after acknowledging that he has plagiarized the work of other journalists.

"I took careless shortcuts that in the end constituted plagiarism," Dunphy told me on Friday. "I apologize to the Blethen family (owners of *The Times*), to Times readers and to my former colleagues for the betrayal of the trust placed in me."

Readers are entitled to know what happened and where we go from here.

Here is what happened:

Recently a reader wrote to *The Times* pointing out that a story by Dunphy that was published Jan. 19, 1997, contained seven paragraphs that were originally published in the *Journal of Commerce's* AirCommerce Special on March 25, 1996. The reader came across the two stories about the expansion of airports in Asia while doing research and was troubled that Dunphy's story gave no credit to the *Journal of Commerce*.

Dunphy was unable to recall or explain what happened but agreed the story should have credited the *Journal of Commerce*. The lack of attribution was wrong and unacceptable.

"He said it was obviously a cut-and-paste job with no attempt to try to camouflage the material," Becky Bisbee, *Times* Business editor, told other senior editors. "He said he probably used a number of wire stories and other sources — information he gathered in anticipation of writing the Sunday centerpiece story — and carelessly squished them all together when he wrote the story."

Although it happened more than seven years ago, the incident was particularly troubling because it mirrored an instance in April 2000 when Dunphy picked up without attribution several anecdotes and some language from the book "About This Life" by Barry Lopez.

Back then, Dunphy brought the issue to *Times* editors after it was raised with him by someone at his church. He wrote a letter to Lopez that said:

"My only defense, and it is a lame one, is that it was unintentional. I had worked on the story over a period of several months with several long breaks. I lost track of what I had from where.

"I have informed my editors of my mistake. They have reviewed the situation and taken disciplinary action in the form of a letter of reprimand placed in my permanent personnel file.

"But nothing can substitute for my own sense of regret. I am embarrassed, mortified and committed a serious breach of journalistic standards, especially embarrassing for a journalist like myself with more than 35 years in the business. But I would have felt worse if it had gone unnoticed."

Editors at the time, which was before Bisbee joined the staff, were satisfied that what had happened was a mistake. Dunphy's response, including bringing it to our attention, indicated he grasped the seriousness of the matter. Still, the disciplinary letter in his file made clear that any future transgression would not be tolerated.

So, what to do four years later when we received the e-mail about the Asia airport story, which had been published three years before the reprimand? Those of us wrestling with the question were David Boardman, managing editor; Cyndi Nash, associate managing editor; Patricia Foote, assistant managing editor; Bisbee; and me, with guidance from people in the Human Resources Department.

Had the airport story been written after the 2000 incident, we would have terminated Dunphy, as we had warned him could happen. The sequence of events gave us pause.

The question we needed to resolve was whether the 1997 incident was also a mistake or part of a pattern that continued beyond 2000. Dunphy had changed his reporting and record-keeping practices after the 2000 warning, providing more precise attribution in the text of his stories.

Bisbee told Dunphy the reprimand in his file would be upgraded to the highest level of discipline short of termination. They talked extensively about the 1997 story, his current methodology, and the need for even greater diligence moving forward.

She made it clear that any discovery of an infraction since 2000 or in the future would be the end.

Bisbee said that Dunphy didn't feel there were any more examples of plagiarism in his work, but "he really doesn't know," she told the rest of us.

We felt further investigation was necessary, so we examined a sample of 25 stories written since 2000. "We selected stories that would fit the pattern — centerpiece stories for which Steve had time to gather string in advance, often requiring travel," Bisbee said.

We selected at least eight paragraphs, including a quote, from each story and ran it through LexisNexis, an online research database, to find matches. The search didn't turn up any cases of plagiarism. While this investigation was not exhaustive, it gave us some reason to think these were isolated incidents.

We weren't satisfied that our search technique was adequate and determined that we would need to acquire software to assist us in this and other situations like it. We also felt that we owed it to the staff to conduct training on attribution and plagiarism to avoid any confusion over standards.

We felt we needed to set the record straight about the 1997 Asia airport story. Last Sunday we published a correction crediting the Journal of Commerce for the seven paragraphs. We anticipated that the correction might raise some questions and the possibility that it would bring other problems to light. We felt it was best to handle those as they arose.

If asked, we would have said Dunphy was the writer. That was no secret. The correction didn't name Dunphy because corrections don't typically name the reporter or editor responsible. What matters most is setting the record straight, and we were doing that.

We would want people to know that we take these matters seriously, but we wouldn't comment on discipline because that is a personnel matter. We would tell people that we didn't think there was a larger problem, but if there were we would report it.

I'm sure the correction prompted curiosity in many corners of the newsroom — no more so than in the investigative team. "I Team" members asked each other and various editors what was behind the correction.

"Given the extraordinary nature of the correction, it raised a lot of questions in my mind," said David Heath, one of those reporters.

He looked at the 1997 story and was concerned it might not be an isolated problem. "This had nothing to do with Steve," Heath said. "I just wanted to satisfy myself that there wasn't anything else out there to be found." If there was something more, we should find it before anyone else did.

Heath used a similar search methodology to what we had used earlier to examine Dunphy's stories, but with a different focus. "I looked for phrasing that was unique," he said. He found another story from 1997 and two from 2004 that raised questions, which he shared with editors.

Bisbee showed the stories to Dunphy and said that we would broaden the investigation with an exhaustive check. Given the stories already in front of him, Dunphy felt he and the newspaper had no choice. He would resign after 37 years here. He said he wanted to do whatever he could to minimize the impact on The Times.

He cited the pressure of writing stories in addition to five columns a week.

"In retrospect, I find that I got into trouble when I tried to do more than just a column. In hindsight, I wish I had been more of an SOB and said I would just do columns rather than to try to be more than I could be. The plagiarism represented in these cases came from taking shortcuts — to get the story done, to get the information to readers. It was not intentional in the sense of some other cases of plagiarism that have surfaced recently. I was not trying to make up things.

"I have always felt I was more a conduit of information than a 'personal' columnist. I personally checked and reported all of the information in the Alaska piece (one of the stories in question). I knew one reporter had recorded the interview in the Taiwan-Singapore case (another of the stories), that he would have it word for word where my notes were lacking. In a perverse way, my goal was accuracy. But that, as I have said, is by way of explanation not an excuse. It was unintentional although the record is hard to argue with at this point."

Dunphy is as decent a person as I know. He is heartbroken, but in the end he takes responsibility for what happened. "I did it to myself," he told me.

We are continuing the examination and have found additional problems. When the work is complete we will give readers an accounting. We can't unwrite past stories or undo the damage from something like this, but we can set the record straight and we will.

So, where do we go from here, and what assurance can we give readers that our work is our own?

We have engaged the services of an independent outsider, Robert Steele, the Nelson Poynter Scholar for Journalism Values at the Poynter Institute, whose mission is "to help journalists seek and achieve excellence." He'll be in the newsroom tomorrow to counsel those of us who were directly involved in handling this matter to help us see what we might have done better. We owe that to the staff and to readers.

Steele will work with our standing Committee on Ethics and Standards in developing new procedures, policies and training about issues of attribution. The committee will develop new checks and balances to provide independent safeguards against plagiarism.

In a daily newspaper that brings together information from dozens of news sources, there is some gray between the black and white of what is or isn't plagiarism. But no one would disagree that a writer should not use someone else's work and portray it as his own. Those of us in the newsroom will work together so that readers can trust that we are intellectually honest with them in our reporting. You can help by bringing any concern to our attention.

Ultimately this is about the relationship of journalists to each other and to the public we serve. Those of us in the newsroom have a personal responsibility to hold each other accountable, which was the spirit in which the investigative team asked some uncomfortable questions and found some disturbing answers.

It is also the spirit in which Steve Dunphy made a painful but necessary decision to resign.

And it's the spirit in which the reader brought the 1997 story to our attention. Here's what he wrote to Bisbee after she thanked him for contacting us:

"I thought about whether to send it in for a little while — about whether it was the right thing to do, and the consequences of it on Mr. Dunphy's career. I want to remain anonymous, and I don't want to be known as the person who hurt Mr. Dunphy, his career, and his family. It makes me sad to think that by reporting this I could ruin a man's career and his ability to support his family. The reason I did it is that it would not be fair to the public to not report it. I hope you understand my position."

We do.

If you have a comment on news coverage, write to Michael R. Fancher, P.O. Box 70, Seattle, WA 98111, call 206-464-3310 or send e-mail to mfancher@seattletimes.com. More columns at www.seattletimes.com/columnists

