



Globe, after extensive review, suspends columnist

By [Michael Levenson](#)

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The Boston Globe said Friday that it will suspend columnist Kevin Cullen without pay for three months after an examination of his work found significant problems in a series of radio interviews and some public remarks he made in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013.

When he returns, Cullen will work as a general assignment reporter for the first two months before returning to his role as a columnist, Globe publisher John W. Henry and editor Brian McGrory wrote in a statement. Cullen will be barred from outside broadcast interviews for the first six months after his return, and subsequent appearances will be given heightened editorial scrutiny.

“Our review leads us to a conclusion that Mr. Cullen damaged his credibility,” Henry and McGrory wrote. “These were serious violations for any journalist and for the Globe, which relies on its journalists to adhere to the same high standards of ethics and accuracy when appearing on other platforms. Our review also leads us to believe that Mr. Cullen did not commit irrevocable damage.”

The statement from Henry and McGrory said Cullen has acknowledged his failures, and quoted a May e-mail from him in which he wrote, “I own what I did,” and added, “I accept responsibility for these shortcomings and I’m sorry that it has allowed some to attack the Globe itself.”

Cullen declined to comment further Friday.

Scott Steeves, president of the Boston Newspaper Guild, which represents Globe employees, said the union will fight Cullen's suspension.

"The Guild stands behind Kevin 110 percent, disagrees with the findings, and looks forward to defending him in arbitration," Steeves said.

Cullen has been on paid leave since April, when sports talk-radio station WEEI raised questions about whether he had implied he was at the scene of the Marathon bombings when he was not, and may have fabricated details of his reporting about the tragedy.

In response, the Globe conducted two separate reviews.

One focused on Cullen's Marathon-related work and his media interviews in the wake of the tragedy, and was led by Kathleen Carroll, the former executive editor of the Associated Press, and Tom Fiedler, dean of the College of Communication at Boston University.

A second report, by two Globe editors, Scott Allen and Brendan McCarthy, and a former Globe reporter, Joseph Kahn, fact-checked a random sampling of 100 of Cullen's columns on other subjects and found no signs of fabrication.

His column subjects, when called as part of the fact-checking review, often praised his commitment to getting the story right.

"We did find five small errors of fact — a name misspelled here, a detail wrong there — but far more commonly people praised Kevin's accuracy and, in many cases, his willingness to call back to confirm details," the second report said.

The report by Carroll and Fiedler focused its harshest scrutiny on a series of radio interviews that Cullen gave early on the morning of April 16, 2013, hours after the bombings on April 15, and on Cullen's remarks at an academic conference in August 2013.

One story Cullen told at the conference was, they concluded, "a complete fabrication."

"This is not a conclusion we reached easily, but it is where the facts direct us," they wrote.

That story Cullen told involved him bumping into a fire official, Joe Finn, outside the Eire Pub in Dorchester on the night of the bombings.

Cullen told the gathering that Finn handed him his phone and asked him to persuade a firefighter named Sean O'Brien to join them for a drink. After O'Brien declined, Cullen said, Finn told him that "Sean found the kid," referring to 8-year-old Martin Richard, who was killed in the blast.

Fiedler and Carroll wrote: "It is clear from interviews with the firefighters Mr. Cullen has cited that the episode simply did not happen."

The report said the story was one of several that Cullen related in media interviews about firefighters who were struggling with what they had experienced at the bombings.

But Carroll and Fiedler said they could not corroborate the stories, and said, "Mr. Cullen says he does not remember whom he was talking about."

"It strains credulity that on one of the most searing days of his professional life he had deeply emotional conversations with someone he cared about, but now does not remember who it was," the report said. "It is also clear that one thing he told some interviewers — that he was talking to a firefighter named Sean — cannot be true," the report stated, because O'Brien is certain he did not talk with Cullen on the night of the bombings and only met him the following day, when Cullen visited his firehouse.

The report also criticized Cullen for relating another story in a radio interview on April 16 that involved O'Brien searching in vain for the missing leg of a girl, later identified as Jane Richard, Martin's sister. Carroll and Fiedler said O'Brien disputed the story and called it "crazy."

The report quoted Cullen as saying, "These were interviews I gave when I'd been up all night. I'd been drinking. And I was really upset."

The report also faulted the Globe for failing to correct an error in [Cullen's column of April 16, 2013](#), in which he reported that Martin Richard was killed after hugging his father, who had just run the Marathon. Bill Richard did not run the Marathon that day.

The statement from McGrory and Henry says the failure to promptly correct the mistake was a clear violation of Globe standards. Cullen bears responsibility for the error, the statement said, as does his direct supervisor, managing editor Jennifer Peter. The Globe has now corrected the error.

McGrory also faulted himself. “I am accountable for the system, and when it fails, I have as well,” he wrote.

The report found no basis for the charge that Cullen intentionally misled readers that he was at the Marathon bombings when he used evocative language about the “smell” and “taste” of that day in his [column on the fifth anniversary](#) of the tragedy this year.

But the report said any “ambiguity” created by such literary devices “could easily have been avoided by deftly adding clarifying language as to what he witnessed and what he learned” from other sources, such as video or news coverage of the blast.

Fiedler and Carroll concluded that, while the Globe’s standards for accuracy and trustworthiness are strong and clear, “Kevin Cullen failed to live up to those standards a number of times when he was writing and talking about the 2013 Marathon bombing.”

“In some cases, his Globe editors failed as well and are equally culpable in not being more rigorous in enforcing the newsroom’s ethics guidelines regarding second-hand sourcing and correcting erroneous reports,” the report stated. “Still, we believe Mr. Cullen must bear the burden of his missteps.”

Henry and McGrory wrote that when the Globe falls short of accuracy, “we must immediately fix what went wrong — and we do.”

“While there was chaos unfolding the entire week of the Boston Marathon bombings, it’s in the most trying circumstances that we must perform at our very best,” they wrote. “And on all other fronts in our coverage of the bombings, the Globe did just that, including correcting, immediately and transparently, another mistake in our coverage that week.”

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