

## MEMORANDUM

To: Brian McGrory

From: Scott Allen, Brendan McCarthy and Joseph Kahn

Date: May 31, 2018

Subject: Review of Kevin Cullen columns, 2012-2018

We reviewed 100 columns written by Kevin Cullen, contacting primary sources, checking facts, and, when available, reading other media coverage of the same events. 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.

We found no evidence that Cullen made up sources of information. In fact, only one of the scores of people we contacted complained that the quotes attributed to him were not entirely accurate. The person, a VFW administrator quoted in "Hey, here's a crazy idea: Students, veterans need to talk," said that his "quotes were cut off, apparently for purposes of the article." This administrator also complained that Cullen got the post's price for a Pabst Blue Ribbon wrong (it's \$1.25, not a dollar), but he agreed the column was generally accurate.

Perhaps the most significant factual inaccuracy we could find was this: Cullen misspelled the name of the main character in "Memory resonates in neighborhood that shaped Menino." For the record, Chereel Stafilopathis liked the column anyway.

We did find evidence that, on occasion, Cullen was not clear with readers about the source of information, sometimes providing no attribution for scenes and dialogue -- a relatively common practice among columnists who employ a narrative style. In "Bonds, unbroken, and a delivery from the ashes," he recounts a gripping discussion as though he were a witness, but Cullen's primary sources for the story did not remember Cullen being present. While not necessarily inaccurate, Cullen's vivid retelling may give readers the false impression that the dialogue is exactly true rather than Cullen repeating someone's best recollection of what happened.

In another column, "Charlie Austin was the nicest guy in a competitive business," Cullen related a personal anecdote so vague that commentators on WEEI-AM questioned whether it happened. Cullen claimed that, back "when Ronald Reagan was still president," a state official blocked him from attending an attorney general's press conference, but Austin had persuaded the official to let Cullen in. Cullen believes that the press conference in question was in 1984, when Frank Bellotti was attorney general, but he couldn't remember the topic and acknowledged he never complained about his mistreatment by the aide. And, since

Charles Austin is deceased and Cullen never knew the aide's name, there is virtually no way to verify the story.

But, for every criticism, there were many more people who praised Kevin for going above and beyond the call of duty, championing the little guy when other journalists wouldn't. Darby O'Brien of Holyoke said the bullying-induced suicide of Phoebe Prince was being swept under the rug until Kevin wrote a column about it: "He was intense. He was accurate as hell and he had a huge impact." The case became a national call to arms against bullying.

Likewise, Denise Barrasso said Kevin's column about her 100-year-old father's service at the Battle of the Bulge ("Grace and Tony: an Eastie love story") gave him a peace of mind he had not known for years -- and Kevin even came to his birthday party after the column had been published. In the same vein, when Kevin wrote about the death of a homeless veteran in 2016 ("Making sure their service to their country is not forgotten"), he rode in the hearse with the man's body to the cemetery. Without ever calling attention to the fact he was there.

Many of the people we talked to were aware that Kevin had been placed on leave and they were eager to defend him against WEEL's attacks, offering other people we could contact for character references. "I l-o-o-o-ve Kevin Cullen," said Toni Norton, the subject of a 2017 column ("Curbside camaraderie"), before vigorously slamming the Kirk & Callahan show for criticizing him.

"These guys would have come after Kevin" regardless of the facts, said injured rugby player Dr. Steve Durant, an MGH psychologist, who was quoted in a 2016 column. "Problems? None. Zero. It was done professionally and with affection on Kevin's part."

Much of WEEL's criticism of Cullen's work centered on two issues: quoting people who are identified either by first name only or not at all and relating anecdotes without providing a source for the information. To determine how common these practices are, we reviewed all 105 Cullen columns from 2016 for incomplete sourcing -- a separate undertaking from the review of 100 columns discussed above in this memo. We found five instances all year in which Cullen did either one.

To be clear, we found numerous cases in which Cullen did not identify peripheral characters in his columns or quoted people describing the actions of other, unnamed individuals. But these are common journalistic practices and not a cause for concern. However, failing to fully identify a major source in a story is a potentially significant issue because it prevents the reader from knowing who is providing the information. Globe reporters employ unnamed sources only in special circumstances such as when revealing the source's name would threaten the source's well-being.

Twice in 2016, Kevin leaned on unnamed or first-name-only sources to tell important parts of his story. The stories may be entirely accurate, but, without names attached, readers have no way to know if the source is fair and reliable -- and no one is publicly accountable for the information.

For example, in "With MS-13, history is repeating itself," Kevin extensively quotes an East Boston bodega operator without naming him. Everything attributed to the bodega operator may be accurate, but it's hard for anyone to judge the reliability of the information without going to Maverick Square to find him.

Likewise, in "Strength beyond horror," Kevin relates the story of Catherine, who was raised by nuns in degrading circumstances, without providing her last name. A person quoted by name in the column who knew Catherine said that she did not want her full name used publicly, so Kevin was protecting her privacy. But Cullen does not explain why he has not fully identified her, leaving the reader to wonder.

We also identified three columns in which it's difficult to determine the source of Kevin's anecdote. In "New name, same mind-numbing bureaucracy," Kevin describes writing a story many years before about a shooting in the Old Colony projects as well as a stabbing in the Orchard Park projects that he wrote about two days later. We can't locate any Globe piece going back to 1980 with a Cullen byline or tagline that mentions "Old Colony" and a "shooting." We did, though, find a 1988 story about a search for a murder suspect in what Cullen described as the "Orchard Park housing project" that also mentions, in passing, an unrelated stabbing. It's plausible but unclear if this is what he was referring to.

Likewise, in "The pope of Florian Hall," Kevin includes a short anecdote in which the central character of the column, Mike Mullane, colorfully helps a woman out. But since Mullane is dead and the woman is unnamed, it's impossible to know who told Kevin the anecdote or if he witnessed the scene himself. However, Cullen does include quotes from other firefighters as well as his own firsthand observations about Mullane.

We are not saying that the unsourced information is incorrect, but the lack of specific sourcing makes them difficult to verify.

And that brings us to the larger issue in Kevin Cullen's work. At his best, Cullen's writing is among the most appealing that appears in the Globe -- precise, well observed and often standing up for the forgotten man and woman with profound effect. Reading dozens of Cullen's columns in succession gives us a heightened appreciation for Cullen's humane sensibility and commitment to use his journalism for good. It's no wonder that so many of the people he has quoted over the years rushed to his defense.

But, on occasion, Cullen employs journalistic tactics that unnecessarily raise questions about his accuracy -- whether it's vague sourcing, referring to people only

by their first name, or even describing someone as his friend when the person is really more of an acquaintance. These techniques may make columns seem more authoritative to some and make Cullen appear more intimate with his news sources, but they run the risk of misleading readers. And, in stressful situations such as the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing, such practices may open the door to providing seriously misleading information to the public.

**Correction:** A report on the Globe's review of columns by Kevin Cullen incorrectly identified the operator of an East Boston bodega in a column about the MS-13 gang. The report has been updated. The Globe regrets the error.