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Journalists Say Paper Failed to Stop Deceit of Reporter

By JACQUES STEINBERG

A committee of outside journalists investigating how Jack Kelley, a former star correspondent at USA Today, was able to insert fabrications and uncredited passages from other publications into his articles is expected to report its findings to the newspaper's publisher as soon as Friday.

But interviews with journalists at USA Today last week offered a possible preview of the report, one in which the ambitions of an upstart national newspaper, the perceived favoritism of editors and Mr. Kelley's considerable charm contributed to the paper's failure to catch the deceptions.

Six journalists at the paper, in telephone interviews, said they or their colleagues had approached editors with suspicions about the accuracy of four articles by Mr. Kelley in recent years, including one about his slipping into Kosovo with a group of Kosovo Liberation Army fighters and the shooting down of a plane filled with missionaries over Peru.

But their concerns, they said, were often dismissed by editors. And when editors had pursued their suspicions, Mr. Kelley was able to persuade them of the soundness of his work with his charm, tales of derring-do and assurances of contacts deep within the intelligence community.

"Jack came up with stories that were gripping and compelling, and he was certainly held up to the staff as the gold standard of what we should try to be," said Tom Kenworthy, a correspondent in Denver who joined the newspaper in 2000. "I think people wanted to believe he was getting these great stories."

"There were certainly raised eyebrows and direct complaints," Mr. Kenworthy added. "But it's hard to go to your superiors and say the guy we keep nominating for Pulitzers" - five times in Mr. Kelley's case - "is making stuff up."

Mr. Kelley, 43, resigned under pressure in January, not because of problems with his articles but because during an investigation of his work, he had asked a woman to represent herself, falsely, as the translator on an article from Belgrade in 1999 that his editors were questioning.

The investigation was prompted by an anonymous complaint from a colleague last spring, soon after The [New York Times](#) had disclosed the fabrications and other deceptions of Jayson Blair, a former reporter.

After Mr. Kelley's departure and more complaints about other articles written by him - the only USA Today reporter to become a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize since it began in 1982 - the newspaper brought in three experienced journalists to oversee a team of reporters to investigate further.

Earlier this month, USA Today reported "strong evidence" that at least eight articles contained "substantial" fabrications, and accused Mr. Kelley of using nearly two dozen passages from competitors without attribution.

John Seigenthaler, the chairman of the three-member committee of outside editors, said in preparing its report, the panel had interviewed more than 70 USA Today staff members.

"We have made an examination of as many editors as we can find who handled various elements of Jack Kelley's work," said Mr. Seigenthaler, the former editor and publisher of The Tennessean.

"We will recount, as best we can," he added, "how it happened and how it might not have happened, indeed how it should not have happened."

How much of that report is made public, Mr. Seigenthaler said, has yet to be determined by Craig Moon, the newspaper's publisher.

Mr. Seigenthaler said the team of reporters - which is expected to continue its work - had identified a dozen additional articles written in the last 10 years that "to one degree or another may be suspect."

Debbie Howlett, a correspondent in Chicago, said it was appropriate for the committee to examine the role of the newspaper's most senior editors. Specifically, she cited Karen Jurgensen, who has been the newspaper's top editor since 1999, and Hal Ritter, the managing editor for news.

"What worries me is that this is going to get dumped down the food chain to some lower level editors," she said. "Hal Ritter has been the managing editor for news for the last 10 years."

A USA Today spokesman, Steven Anderson, said Ms. Jurgensen and Mr. Ritter would not comment on the investigation of Mr. Kelley while it was continuing.

Mr. Kelley has declined through a lawyer to comment on the report. But in a statement after his resignation, he said, "I'm proud of my work and know that my reporting will hold up under scrutiny."

Steven Komarow, a reporter at USA Today for a decade, said, "It's very clear he couldn't have done this without enablers, and without people looking the other way when they had suspicions or were informed of suspicions."

Among the forces driving such behavior, Mr. Komarow said, was "the great joy when you can produce a story that makes it look like you have outdone the big guys, the papers with a huge foreign staff - The Times, The Post, The L.A. Times."

But such goals put enormous pressures on the newsroom, Mr. Komarow said, considering that USA Today - which did not have a full-time correspondent abroad until 1995 - has only four foreign correspondents now. The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times, for example, have more than two dozen each.

That Mr. Kelley's work was at times subject to scrutiny by his editors is clear, though how skeptical they were of what he told them is not.

For example, one article that some senior editors raised questions about - so much so that they held it out of the paper for several nights, according to Linda Mathews, then a national assignment editor - was Mr. Kelley's first-hand account of the days leading up to a boat launch by refugees fleeing Cuba in March 2000.

Ms. Mathews, who did not edit the article but was in the newsroom at the time, said that at least one senior editor had pressed Mr. Kelley about the fate of the refugees. Ultimately, Mr. Kelley assured his editors that six of the refugees had died in a storm, and six had survived, and the article ran on the front page. In its report on the team's preliminary findings, the newspaper said the article "was a lie from start to finish."

Mr. Kelley's article in April 1999 about the Kosovo Liberation Army fighters also raised eyebrows. At the time, Ms. Howlett was stationed in Albania and had been trying in vain to file a similar report.

When she returned to the United States, she said she read Mr. Kelley's article and complained to several editors on the foreign desk - she said she could not recall with certainty which ones - that "there were a lot of things that didn't ring true."

Not only did she not think he was with the soldiers, but she questioned such details as his description of one fighter calling in a NATO air strike on a convoy of Serbian military trucks, and then kneeling down to sketch an ambush plan. Why, Ms. Howlett wondered, wouldn't the soldiers have then taken cover?

Ms. Howlett said she did not believe that any editor had followed up on her complaint. "Given Jack's reputation, the regard the editors held him in, there was no percentage in it for me," Ms. Howlett said. Douglas Stanglin, the newspaper's foreign editor at the time, said he could not recall receiving such a complaint but that was possible.

Another article the panel now considers "suspect" is a front-page account from April 2001 in which Mr. Kelley described, verbatim, the contents of a cockpit recording made on a C.I.A.-operated surveillance plane over Peru that was tracking a plane of missionaries. That plane was mistakenly shot down because it was believed to be carrying drug traffickers.

Barbara Slavin, a USA Today reporter who had been working on an investigative article about the shooting, said she was amazed that soon after being included in the assignment, Mr. Kelley claimed he "had the whole tape played for him."

Ms. Slavin said several people at the C.I.A. disputed that assertion, which she said she conveyed "to my editors," whom she refused to identify. At least one editor, she said, "confronted Jack and as far as I understand got an alibi from him, a source he said would vouch."

At other times, the pressures of editing on a tight deadline and the fundamental belief that a reporter is telling his editor the truth appeared to work in Mr. Kelley's favor.

Ms. Mathews, who began editing the newspaper's daily front-page features, known as "cover stories," in April 2000, was one of the primary editors on his front-page account, in August 2001, of the bombing of a pizza restaurant in Jerusalem.

In its accounting of that article, the team of reporters investigating Mr. Kelley found that an early draft contained a description of three severed heads rolling down the street "with their eyes still blinking."

By the time the article reached her computer, Ms. Mathews said, the description of the blinking eyes had been removed and she has no recollection of it. But she did let stand Mr. Kelley's account of the heads rolling down the street, as well as his description of having seen the bomber. None of those descriptions, the team of reporters found, are consistent with police accounts and photographs of the scene.

"It never crossed my mind to wonder whether he was embroidering," Ms. Mathews said.