

## MEMORANDUM

To: Brian McGrory  
From: Kathleen Carroll and Tom Fiedler  
Date: May 29, 2018

### **Subject: Report on Kevin Cullen**

We are submitting this report in response to your request that we undertake a detailed review of Globe columnist Kevin Cullen's coverage of events emanating from the April 15, 2013 bombing attack of the Boston Marathon, and of his subsequent comments as a Globe representative in other media interviews and in public discussions.

Your request was prompted by questions raised about the journalistic integrity of Mr. Cullen's work relative to the bombing primarily by on-air personalities on radio station WEEI, frequent critics of The Globe and of Mr. Cullen. However, our examination of that and other work touching on this subject was neither limited to nor guided by the WEEI allegations. Therefore we don't see the need to focus directly on them in this report. Relevant to us isn't the initial source of the criticism, but the validity of that criticism.

We applaud your willingness to engage us as external fact-finders in this process. While we share with you decades-long engagement in journalism, we have no connections to The Globe nor to Mr. Cullen. We also share with you the belief that the lifeblood of journalism is devotion to truth and the recognition that, when the devotion to truth is compromised, public trust is lost.

Our report encompasses these areas of concern:

1. Errors made by Mr. Cullen in his writing for The Globe in his April 16, 2013 column that weren't corrected subsequently, as is mandated in the Boston Globe's policies.
2. Misstatements made by Mr. Cullen in media interviews and panel comments in the hours, days and months after the April 15 attack, some of which have no plausible explanation and raise the concern of fabrication.
3. Mr. Cullen's writing style, common among columnists, of relying on unnamed sources (for example, "firefighters told me....") works against journalistic transparency and fact-checking. He also employs the technique of seeming to place himself as a witness to news events (for example, "I saw... I smelled ... I heard"), although in actuality he learned about these events through interviews with others, hearsay, or by watching video coverage.
4. The responsibility of Globe editors in handling Mr. Cullen's columns during this period and their apparent failure to hold him to account for accuracy and to ensure that errors were corrected when discovered.

5. The possible failure of Globe editors to make Mr. Cullen (and all Globe reporters) fully aware of their responsibility under the ethics policy to be just as accurate when speaking or writing for The Globe in other media and public interviews as is expected when writing for the news report
6. In conducting this review, we interviewed Mr. Cullen; Managing Editor Jennifer Peter (who, in her prior position as Metro Editor edited Mr. Cullen's columns and oversaw his work during this period); Sunday Editor Mark Morrow, who has edited Mr. Cullen's columns and, as projects editor, also supervised Mr. Cullen on investigative work; former standards Editor Christine Chinlund, and Projects Editor Scott Allen. At our request, Mr. Allen also interviewed several people whom Mr. Cullen had identified as sources for his reporting, including Boston Fire Commissioner Joe Finn; Fire Department Lieutenant Sean O'Brien, firefighter Ben Upton and Edward A. Kelly, a Boston firefighter who is now a firefighter union executive.

A note on this report's organization: In the interest of clarity, we have organized this review chronologically. That is, we begin with Mr. Cullen's initial column, which was written in the evening and late night of April 15, 2013, the day of the bombing, and published in The Globe on April 16. We then examine Mr. Cullen's actions in the hours, days and months later as he engaged in media interviews and public discussions, and as he addressed the bombing in articles written for other publications. Our comments and concerns, if any, follow each of these elements.

We have numbered and titled each element in an effort to make it easier to follow. A summary of our findings is at the end of this report, followed by an appendix that includes links to the articles in question and the media interviews of which we have been made aware. This review is not a complete record of Mr. Cullen's work and activities during this period as we include here only those columns or appearances that we felt raised concerns and warranted discussion.

We also have not extended our review beyond Mr. Cullen's work relative to the bombing, other than selecting a few columns published prior to and after the bombing to get a sense of his reporting technique and writing style. None of those randomly selected columns raised concerns for us suggesting that we needed to broaden this review. The Globe's leadership is conducting a review of Mr. Cullen's columns over the past several years that is separate and apart from our work.

**1. COLUMN PUBLISHED APRIL 16, 2013: Metro B1, headline: "A Perfect Day, then the unimaginable"**

This column did everything that a reader would want in capturing the events of that day: scope, emotion, historical context and a strong, personal voice. However, an insert added for the final edition also introduced an error that was compounded in subsequent media appearances. Also, Mr. Cullen's writing style opened the way for critics to allege that he implies witnessing things that he actually learned about from others. We'll deal with those separately.

**The error:** Mr. Cullen filed an insert by phone to his first edition story that read: *I went out Monday night and bumped into some firefighters I know. They said one of the dead was an 8-year-old boy from Dorchester who had gone out to hug his dad after he crossed the finish line. The dad walked on; the boy went back to the sidewalk to join his mom and his little sister. And then the bomb went off. The boy was killed. His sister's leg was blown off. His mother was badly injured. That's just one -family, one story.*

This is a reference to the Richard family, who weren't identified in any of The Globe's reporting in its April 16 editions because sourcing wasn't complete. Though he did not identify them by name in that first column, Mr. Cullen accurately reported that Martin, age 8, was killed; his sister Jane, age 7, lost her leg, and their mother, Denise, was injured by shrapnel and hospitalized. The error is in the statement that the father, Bill Richard, ran the Marathon and had crossed the finish line. Mr. Richard didn't run the race and thus the scene described in the paragraph of Martin hugging his father was incorrect.

We certainly recognize and appreciate that reporting in the midst of such a chaotic event is extremely challenging and that mistakes can be made. In this instance, however, we found two problems that suggest a breakdown in the reporting process. First was the vague sourcing of the information, which Mr. Cullen attributed in the column to "some firefighters I know."

In our May 2018 interview, Mr. Cullen said, "I had heard the story during the day that the dead kid's father ran the race." As he had written, Mr. Cullen repeated that he heard that story "from firefighters," but he said he couldn't recall their names. He said, "I spoke to every firefighter, cop, EMS worker I could find" that day. In a previous 2018 interview with Globe editors who had received questions about that part of the column, Mr. Cullen said he heard that Bill Richard had run the race from "a woman on Carruth Street," apparently a neighbor of the family. Mr. Cullen said he couldn't recall the woman's name.

Without Bill Richard's name, even a diligent, fact-checking editor handling Mr. Cullen's column couldn't check race results to see if, in fact, the father of the dead boy had run the race.

However, when the identities of the family members became public on the following day, the error was found and, according to The Globe's policy, should have been corrected. It wasn't and still has not been, according to our review.

The error was not in the initial column Mr. Cullen filed from the newsroom at 8:20 p.m. He added it a few hours later, calling in to The Globe from the Eire Pub after hearing the story "from firefighters" he met at the Eire Pub or at J.J. Foley's, both off-duty pubs frequented by first responders. In the May interview with us, Mr. Cullen said he recalled filing the insert to his first-edition column "from the Eire pub" around 10 p.m. (The Globe computer system shows the column was updated at 12:37 a.m. on April 16). He said he doesn't recall which editor handled the insert, although then Metro Editor Jennifer Peter told us in a separate interview that she took the call. She said that Mr. Cullen "was quite insistent ... this had to get in. 'I know this,'" she quoted Mr. Cullen as saying. "I don't remember pushing back. He was really certain and excited [that Bill] Richard had run the marathon."

Ms. Peter said she thinks that Mr. Cullen pushed to identify the dead boy as Martin Richard, but she said she couldn't be certain if that memory is correct. In any event, The Globe's position at that time was to withhold identifying the boy or his family because they could not confirm it with official sources, Ms. Peter told us.

Had Mr. Cullen indeed pushed to identify the Richard family during that phone call, it is likely he had correct information from a credible source. Boston Fire Commissioner Joe Finn, who at the time was a deputy fire commissioner on the scene, told The Globe in 2018 that he learned the boy was Martin Richard late Monday night from Boston Fire Lieutenant Sean O'Brien, who had seen the boy and knew the Richard family. Finn said he believes he shared that information with Mr. Cullen late that night, likely during an encounter at the Eire Pub.

(Mr. Cullen continued to share the incorrect story of the finish-line hug when he did media interview with US and UK broadcasters through much of Tuesday).

**Writing as an eye witness:** In their critique, the radio personalities for WEEI alleged that Mr. Cullen deliberately sought to mislead readers into thinking that he was on Boylston Street, near the finish line, and in position to witness directly the bombing and its aftermath. Here is the section in question, with our underlining added to highlight word choices that could indicate his presence as an observer:

*And so it was alternately poignant and horrifying to watch as first responders frantically pulled metal barriers and the flags of so many different countries down into Boylston Street in a desperate rush to get to the dead and the injured on the sidewalk.*

*Those flags looked like victims, splayed on Boylston Street as the acrid smoke hung in the air.*

*After the initial explosion, runners instinctively craned their necks toward the blast site. Then, 12 seconds later, a second explosion, further up Boylston. It was pandemonium. I saw an older runner wearing high rise pink socks, about to cross the finish line. He was knocked to the ground by a photographer running up Boylston Street toward the second explosion.*

*I saw Lisa Hughes from WBZ-TV trying to do her job, amid the blood and the body parts.*

*Before 3 p.m., the medical tent at the finish line had seen nothing worse than a blister. Then, in an instant, it was transformed into a battlefield triage unit. Doctors and nurses who had been running the race in turn raced to the medical tent and volunteered their services, still sweating, still wearing their running gear.*

In our interview, Mr. Cullen said, "The images I referred to were iconic images. They were shown over and over and over again. I would have been aware of the initial scene of the scramble to get to the victims and all our readers would have had [the same experience]," he said.

Mr. Cullen said he can't explain why he didn't attribute the images to what he (and countless others) saw on television other than it never occurred to him that a reader would be misled into thinking that he was an eyewitness.

We find no evidence to support the allegation that Mr. Cullen intended to mislead readers with his choice of words. To the contrary, to our knowledge Mr. Cullen has never claimed to have been on the scene, either in the hours and days after the bombing, or in subsequent years, in his writing or in public statements. Indeed, he told several interviewers within hours after the bombing that he was about a mile away inside a restaurant in Kenmore Square.

However, his writing style of crafting scenes that imbue him with an omnipresence (a style often used by columnists) could cause a reader unfamiliar with the media saturation coverage of that event, or of Mr. Cullen's writing style, to conclude that he was an eyewitness to the bombing and its immediate aftermath. A lesson to take away would be to weave into such narratives a few words attributing the sources of the images to television or other media. Thus, the ensuing criticism could have been averted by crafting the opening sentence like this: *And so it was alternately poignant and horrifying to watch on television as first responders...*

That lesson would not be new to Mr. Cullen. Mark Morrow, who has edited Mr. Cullen's work as a reporter and a columnist, said that experience gave him a lot of confidence in Mr. Cullen's reporting abilities. Editing the columns, Mr. Morrow said he sometimes asked Mr. Cullen to strengthen the attribution for a scene, fact or quote. "I'd tell him, 'You have to tell the reader how you know,'" Mr. Morrow said, adding that Mr. Cullen always had the requested material. "Never have I challenged him and had a response that made me uneasy."

## **2. MEDIA INTERVIEWS**

Beginning in the post-midnight hours of April 16, 2013, and continuing throughout that day, Mr. Cullen did a number of broadcast interviews, including with programs in the United Kingdom and in the United States. As a former Globe correspondent based in the UK, the interviewers appeared to know Mr. Cullen and to have a high regard for him.

However, some of the details that he provided during those interviews have become problematic in that Mr. Cullen repeated the error regarding the finish-line hug between Bill Richard and his son Martin, or he described scenes in which he was centrally involved but that, to the best of our knowledge, didn't occur.

Again, we'll deal with this in chronological order and provide a summary and our conclusions at the end.

### **BBC Ulster interview, about 5 a.m. Boston time, April 16, 2013**

In this interview, Mr. Cullen for the first time identifies the dead boy as Martin Richard and his father as Bill Richard. He repeats the errant story of Martin joining his father at the finish after

his father finished the race, then went away to register his finishing time (which actually isn't necessary as times are recorded on a chip tied to a runner's shoelace).

Perhaps more problematic, Mr. Cullen also describes to the interviewer a scene involving the Richard's 7-year-old daughter Jane, whose leg was severed by the bomb blast. He said "my friend, a firefighter named Sean," found the girl, picked her up and carried her to an ambulance and noticed that a lower leg was missing. Mr. Cullen said, "He told me that he went back to the scene and he crawled on his hands and knees and looked for her leg and he couldn't find it."

Separately, Mr. Cullen recounts an interaction with a different firefighter, who isn't named. "I just got off the phone not long ago with a young firefighter who I'm very concerned about. He's a young kid. He's a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan and he told me what he saw today was worse than anything he saw in a war zone."

#### **BBC Radio 4, interview with news presenter Martha Kearney, about 6 a.m., April 16, 2013**

In this interview, Mr. Cullen said that he was about "a mile away" from the finish line and "kind of heard" the bombs detonate. He said he "saw" first responders and volunteers overturning barricades and pulling down flags around the finish line to enable helpers to get to victims, though he isn't asked to clarify where he "saw" these images.

He then describes an interaction with an unnamed first-responder on the scene: "I talked to one of them last night and I wanted to get him out of the house and come to meet us and to have a drink. And he didn't want to leave. And he told me he couldn't get the blood out of his fingernails... That is what he was doing. He was at his house trying to scrub his fingernails."

In the interview Mr. Cullen again repeats the finish-line story and identifies the "runner" as Bill Richard. "I know him... He had just finished the marathon... Martin went to the finish and hugged him."

He also describes a telephone conversation he said he had with an unnamed "firefighter who carried the girl [Jane Richard] to the ambulance... He was very upset and said he wished he could have done more."

#### **NewsTalk Breakfast program, interview early morning of April 16, 2013**

In an interview with a program host called Seamus, Mr. Cullen was introduced as "a longtime NewsTalk contributor." It isn't clear whether this interview occurred before or after those conducted with BBC Ulster or BBC Radio 4. But Mr. Cullen told the interviewer that he hadn't yet been home to go to sleep, so it was presumably in the early morning hours.

In this interview Mr. Cullen for the first time identifies a firefighter source as Sean O'Brien, a lieutenant with the Boston Fire Department, who was on the scene of the bombing. He tells the interviewer: "I just got off the phone with a firefighter named Sean O'Brien... He carried a little girl from the blast scene, when he picked her up he realized that her leg was missing and he went

back to the scene and he crawled on his hands and knees trying to find her leg. He said, ‘Kevin, I couldn’t find her leg.’ I said, ‘Sean, if you found it, you couldn’t reattach it.’ He said, ‘Yeah, I know. But I couldn’t find it and I wanted to find it.’”

Later in the same interview, Mr. Cullen circles back to the bombing scene, but introduces it by saying, “a firefighter told me about my pal, Sean, who had to carry that girl...” as if he hadn’t also spoken directly to Sean O’Brien.

Mr. Cullen also describes Bill Richard as “my friend, whom I know... I know Bill from the Eire Pub,” a restaurant in the Dorchester neighborhood.

### **WHYY (Philadelphia NPR affiliate) interview on Radio Times, April 16, 2013**

Mr. Cullen repeated the story about Martin Richard hugging his father at the finish line just before the bomb went off. “... I talked to people who actually saw this,” he told the interviewer. “When Bill crossed the finish line, he came over to the barrier, there were like these metal barriers to keep people on the sidewalk to keep them separated from the runners, and Martin gave his dad a big hug, he was obviously very proud that his dad had finished the marathon, and then Bill went on, you have to register your time, give them your number and stuff ... Martin went back with his mother and sister and the bomb detonated.”

He also spoke repeatedly about his conversations with firefighters troubled by what they had seen at the bomb site. He said his immediate concern was on taking care of a firefighter friend who was having a particularly difficult time. “To be honest ... I’ve been more concerned with a firefighter friend of mine, that’s what I’ve been doing this morning, trying to deal with him and help him,” he said. He later returned to that theme, saying, “I know the firefighter who carried her to the ambulance and he was very, very upset.”

### **COMMENT:**

Several concerns arise from these interviews that raise questions of credibility. It is important to note that The Globe’s ethics guidelines are clear in stating that Globe employees, when representing the newspaper, are held to the same standards of accuracy in media interviews and public appearances that apply to published material. Clearly Mr. Cullen, who was identified in every instance as a Boston Globe columnist, was acting as a representative of the organization. Former Globe Editor Martin Baron established the newsroom’s policy on this subject in a memorandum to staff, which has been incorporated into The Globe’s ethics guidelines and is published on the newsroom’s intranet. Here are the relevant sections pertaining to second-hand sourcing and to broadcast appearances:

### **"QUOTES, ATTRIBUTION AND DATELINES:**

*“One potential transgression is reporting scenes as if we observed them when, in fact, we did not. Our policy prohibits such misrepresentations. Reporters are strongly discouraged from relying upon observations made by others. In the rare instances when using the observations of others is appropriate, our stories must make clear that we did not personally observe the scene being described, and we must identify who made the observation.”*

**“FREELANCE WRITING AND BROADCAST APPEARANCES:**

*“Staff members must ensure that their freelance work does not interfere with their normal responsibilities and that it is consistent with the policies and guidelines of this document.”*

By repeating the erroneous story that Bill Richard ran the Marathon and was met by his son at the finish line, Mr. Cullen (or The Globe) could be held accountable for failing to go back to interviewers to correct the error, if only to prevent having the erroneous story aired in future broadcasts without change.

When we interviewed Mr. Cullen for this report, he said he couldn't recall who told him that the finish-line story was incorrect, but presumed it was “someone who knew the Richards.” He said he told an interviewer for NPR's “All Things Considered” program later on April 16, 2013 that he had gotten the story wrong, and that segment wasn't aired.

Also incorrect was Mr. Cullen's repeated account of the firefighter (whom he identified in some interviews as “Sean”) carrying the injured girl to the ambulance and discovering that a lower leg was gone. Of particular concern is the detail Mr. Cullen gave to the News Talk Breakfast program that “Sean” told Mr. Cullen in a phone conversation that he returned to site, crawling “on hands and knees” in a vain effort to find the limb so it could be reattached. All of that was disputed by Lieutenant O'Brien in an interview with Globe editors, a transcript of which was given to us for this report. In fact, television news reports at the time identified a different firefighter, Matt Patterson, who was at the site, though off-duty from the Lynn Fire Department, as the one who rescued Jane Richard.

In the interview with Globe editors, Lieutenant O'Brien denied speaking with Mr. Cullen at any time Monday, by telephone or otherwise. Indeed, he said he doesn't think he had ever met Mr. Cullen until the day after the Marathon bombing when Mr. Cullen came to the fire station to interview him and other firefighters. He said the story of him rescuing Jane Richard and searching among the debris for her severed limb was “crazy.”

When we related this to Mr. Cullen, he said he couldn't recall what he said in these media interviews, including his accounts of Sean O'Brien's role. “That's the reporting I was getting that day,” Cullen told us. “I was getting this from other firefighters who would have known. The story that was being told to me was that Sean O'Brien picked up the girl and went back to look for her leg.”

He said he had no memory of saying that he had spoken by phone with Sean O'Brien in a conversation that included the dramatic exchange where he said he tried to calm down the distressed firefighter who hoped the girl's severed limb could be reattached. Nor could he recall the identity of the firefighter who Mr. Cullen said refused to join him for a drink at the Eire Pub because he was trying to scrub blood from his fingernails. “These were interviews I gave when I'd been up all night. I'd been drinking. And I was really upset,” he said.

Asked if he had listened to the broadcasts after questions were raised about what he said in them, Mr. Cullen said he had not. He also said he did not review his 2013 columns about the bombing,

although he later clarified that his lawyer, who accompanied him to the interview, had briefed him on the questions and the broadcasts.

### **3. PANELIST, ASSOCIATION FOR EDUCATION IN JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION, AUGUST, 2013**

On at least two occasions, Mr. Cullen described in detail an encounter on the night of the bombing with then-Deputy Fire Chief Joe Finn outside the Eire Pub. One account was contained in an essay written for a book titled *Our Boston*, which was published in October, 2013. The other was in a presentation by Mr. Cullen during a panel discussion about the Marathon bombing at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, an organization of university academics who teach journalism and related fields.

The panel was televised by C-SPAN. In a 12-minute narrative, Mr. Cullen recounted in detail his role in covering the bombing with a focus on the first 24 hours. Lieutenant Sean O'Brien and Deputy Chief Finn are central to that narrative.

In setting the scene late the night of the bombing, Cullen says:

*"I particularly knew Sean O'Brien, he's a friend of mine... After writing my column, I stopped off at the Eire Pub in Dorchester... As I was walking into the Eire Pub, Deputy Fire Chief Joe Finn, a great fireman, grabbed me. He had his iPhone. He said 'This is Sean, Sean O'Brien. I can't get him out of the house.'*

*"And he goes, 'Talk to him.' And I go 'What are you talking about?' [gesturing to the audience to show he now holds Finn's phone]. And I go, 'Sean, it's Kevin.... Why don't you come out? Come out and have a drink with me and Joe.'*

*"And I don't even know what I'm talking to him about. He says, 'No, I don't want to come out. I don't want to come out.' And I said, 'OK, well, I'll see you later.'*

*"And I said to Joe, 'Joe, was Sean at the scene?' And he said, 'Well, Sean found the kid,' and that's when I found out that the boy had died.*

*"And I wanted to kill Joe Finn when he put me in that spot."*

In the account he wrote for the book *Our Boston*, published two months later, Mr. Cullen is not part of the phone conversation. He writes:

*"As I walked toward the pub entrance, I noticed Joe Finn, a deputy chief and one of the best firefighters in the city, standing on the sidewalk. He was talking on his cell phone and motioned me over with one hand. He ended the call and said, 'I was trying to get Sean O'Brien to come out, just to talk. I'm worried about him. I hope he's going to be OK.'*

*"I knew Sean, so I said, 'What happened to him?'"*

“‘He was there,’ Joe Finn said. ‘He was there with the little boy who died.’

“That’s when I first learned of what happened to Martin Richard and his family.”

These accounts are problematic for several reasons, including the question of whether the situation occurred. In separate interviews with Globe editors for this report, neither Chief Finn nor Lieutenant O’Brien recall talking to each other by phone that night, although they said it’s possible. The chief said he recalls checking in with a number of firefighters who had been on the scene because it had been such a difficult day.

Chief Finn said that if he did call Lieutenant O’Brien, it was unlikely to be inviting him to the Eire for a drink because Chief Finn said he had seen Lieutenant O’Brien earlier that night at another pub and firefighter hangout, J.J. Foley’s, where he told him to go home. Lieutenant O’Brien said he recalled having a beer with Chief Finn and another firefighter at that pub, adding: “I didn’t know what I was doing and they said, ‘You’ve got to go home and see your wife.’ ”

Another concern raised by Mr. Cullen’s accounts in these two situations and elsewhere, is the familiarity that Mr. Cullen uses in describing his relationship with Lieutenant O’Brien. This is most evident in the narrative Mr. Cullen delivered at the AEJMC panel. And it also was featured in the April 16 interview with the Irish radio program, News Talk Breakfast, where Mr. Cullen spoke emotionally of a phone call with “my pal, Sean O’Brien” who was distraught over his inability to find Jane Richard’s severed limb in the hope that it could be reattached.

While Mr. Cullen may have known who Sean O’Brien was on the day of bombing, and vice versa, Lieutenant O’Brien told Globe editors in two 2018 interviews that he did not meet Mr. Cullen until the night after the bombing. That’s when Mr. Cullen went to the fire station to interview those firefighters who had been on duty the day before for a follow-up column. Prior to that meeting, the lieutenant said he wouldn’t have been considered a good friend.

Lieutenant O’Brien also disputed a scene that Mr. Cullen described in *Our Boston* where he wrote that “Sean told me” he saw young Martin Richard’s body on the pavement minutes after the bomb blast and said to Mr. Cullen, “I knew Marty was gone.” Lieutenant O’Brien told The Globe editors he didn’t identify the boy’s body at that time and didn’t recall saying those words to anyone. He added that the boy was always known as “Martin” and that he wouldn’t have used the name “Marty.”

#### **4. COLUMN PUBLISHED APRIL 17, 2013: Metro column. Answering the call, in all its poignant horror**

In the late afternoon on the day after the bombing, Mr. Cullen went to the Broadway fire station where Engine 7 and Tower Ladder 17 are based. Firefighters assigned to these units were on

duty during the bombing and many had returned to duty the following afternoon when Mr. Cullen visited.

The column recounts the tragedy striking the Richard family, but doesn't repeat the error about Bill Richard having run the race. Mr. Cullen quotes an unnamed firefighter saying that he came upon the Richard boy's body and "I knew Marty was gone." That firefighter was identified in the *Our Boston* essay as Sean O'Brien, although, as noted above, he denies the statement.

The column also recounts the actions of another firefighter, identified only as a "former Marine," who comes upon the scene and finding "two kids with missing limbs" bleeding badly. According to the columnist's account, the firefighter's attempts to apply a tourniquet to one boy's leg were difficult because the bleeding made the tubing slippery.

One of the firefighters interviewed by Mr. Cullen is a former Marine named Ben Upton. Mr. Upton said in a 2018 interview with Globe editors that he did not transport any children with missing limbs that day. Mr. Kelly, the firefighter and union official who arranged the April 16 firehouse interviews, said the other former Marine who was present then was Thomas Hughes. Mr. Hughes did not return calls from Globe editors in 2018 seeking an interview about his activities on the day of the bombing.

#### **COMMENT:**

The accuracy of this section cannot be verified. The firefighters weren't identified because Mr. Cullen said they agreed to be interviewed for the column only on the condition that their names not be used, something Mr. Kelly confirmed. Granting anonymity to a news source is inherently problematic and should only be done in extraordinary circumstances and with great care. Confusion about who said what could easily slip into the reporting. We believe that this is an example of the danger of anonymous sourcing and, in this instance, it works against Mr. Cullen because the inability to verify the quotes allows questions to remain about their authenticity.

#### **5. COLUMN: Published April 15, 2018, Page B1, Metro: "Five years later, grief feels like a sixth sense"**

Mr. Cullen wrote this column to be included in The Globe's five-year anniversary of the bombing. A section of the column drew an attack from Kirk Minihane, one of the co-hosts of the Kirk & Callahan program on WEEI radio. In setting the column's tone, Mr. Cullen drew on his own responses to physical cues reminding him of the events of April 15, 2013.

He wrote:

*I happened upon a house fire recently, in Mattapan, and the smell reminded me of Boylston Street five years ago, when so many lost their lives and their limbs and their sense of security.*

*I can smell Patriots Day, 2013. I can hear it. God, can I hear it, whenever multiple fire engines or ambulances are racing to a scene.*

*I can taste it, when I'm around a campfire and embers create a certain sensation.*

*I can see it, when I bump into survivors, which happens with more regularity than I could ever have imagined. And I can touch it, when I grab those survivors' hands or their shoulders.*

The WEEI show host mocked that section on the air and in a blog posting, asking rhetorically, “He can smell it? Taste it? See it? Touch it?” This was the jumping-off point to raise the larger question of whether Mr. Cullen was choosing his words carefully – in that column and in others - - so as to imply that he personally witnessed the bombing and many of the events emanating from it in the following hours and days.

In our interview with Mr. Cullen in May, 2018, he dismissed the criticism as “malicious misrepresentation” and repeated what he has said on numerous occasions that he was about a mile away from the Marathon finish line when the blasts occurred and couldn’t get to the scene until days later. He said “my writing device was to personalize it” by drawing on the senses of taste, smell, sight, sound, touch, and to add another of “grief.”

Managing Editor Jennifer Peter told us in a separate interview that she had asked Mr. Cullen to write the anniversary column and, when he filed it, she said she liked it so much that she recommended it – unsuccessfully – for the front page. She said that in editing the column, “I knew he wasn’t there and it didn’t occur to me” that readers may have been misled into thinking that he was. She said the bombing had such a powerful impact on the community that, “there is a sense that this was a universal experience, of [everyone] having lived the experience.”

## **COMMENT:**

We addressed this earlier in this report and, again, we find no basis for the charge that Mr. Cullen was attempting to mislead readers about his location. Yet it does raise the question of whether his choice of literary devices – to place himself in the center of the story – created ambiguity as to what he directly witnessed (and thus sensed), and what he learned from others in his reporting, but didn’t acknowledge.

Globe Sunday Editor Mark Morrow, who also read the column before publication, agreed that a reader unfamiliar with Mr. Cullen’s style could infer from some passages that he was at the scene and witnessed the frantic lifesaving work going on in the medical tent, saw the first responders and volunteers racing to help, and smelled the smoke lingering in the air.

We believe this ambiguity – and thus the ensuing controversy -- could easily have been avoided by deftly adding clarifying language as to what he witnessed and what he learned without jeopardizing the communal emotion the column seeks to capture.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

One of the values that journalists hold most dear is their credibility. Do audiences believe their reporting?

That credibility can be put at risk with every single decision made by every journalist every day. Once it is damaged or lost, credibility is exceedingly difficult to rebuild.

And that is why most news organizations, including the Boston Globe, have strict standards intended to ensure the news product is accurate, fair and trustworthy. Living by those standards is part of a newsroom's covenant with its readers, listeners and viewers.

The Globe's standards 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.

Still, we believe Mr. Cullen must bear the burden of his missteps. Here's why:

A columnist is a high-profile figure in a newsroom and the community it serves. Mr. Cullen's column carries his name and he should be the first and strongest defender of its accuracy and credibility. That was not the case for too much of his work -- written and particularly spoken -- about the 2013 bombing.

There is no question that the day of the bombing and the week of the manhunt that followed were intense ones for Mr. Cullen and for the Globe newsroom. These are the times when newsroom standards are most tested and in many cases Globe journalists and leaders performed admirably.

In every big breaking news event, second- and third-hand stories about what happened circulate, often spread by officials and others who have been trustworthy sources of news in the past. In those circumstances, it is essential that every reporter and editor repeatedly ask, "...and how do you know that?" while tracking back to actual eyewitnesses. Globe reporters and editors lived up to that standard in the news reporting. The standards were dropped, though, when Mr. Cullen called in an item that was sloppily sourced to "some firefighters I know" and Ms. Peter, his editor, did not ask the essential questions that might have kept the error from being published.

Despite best efforts, mistakes will happen from time to time in every news organization. The only thing to do in that case is correct it as quickly and publicly as possible so readers who saw the wrong material will now have the right information.

That did not happen in the case of the erroneous tale of Martin Richard hugging his father at the Marathon finish line shortly before the first bomb detonated. It has been five years since the mistake was printed and five years since Mr. Cullen learned of it.

To this day, the mistake has not been corrected.

We found the explanations for that baffling and troubling. Failure to correct an error that has come to light can appear willful, as if the newspaper is trying to hide the error.

Mr. Cullen said he thought he was told that it would be handled in the main news story on Tuesday, April 16, 2013. But he never checked. The mistake was his and ran in his column. It is an abdication of his responsibility as a columnist, as a journalist, to be so cavalier about a mistake that he made.

Five years later, Managing Editor Peter said she cannot explain why the error has never been corrected. She was aware that the error still stood many months after the bombing, citing it as the reason Mr. Cullen's column was not included in Globe entries for journalism awards.

Mr. Cullen repeated the erroneous story several times in broadcast interviews the day after the bombing. Once he learned it was wrong, he did alert one interviewer who did not air the story. But he did not go back to correct himself with any of the news organizations that interviewed him that day. That raised the possibility that future airing of his interview would perpetuate the error.

Mr. Cullen also told several interviewers emotional stories that day about one or more firefighters who were psychologically struggling with what they had experienced at the bombing. The stories varied and Mr. Cullen sometimes injected himself into the narrative, saying he was talking to, or going to visit, one firefighter about whom he said he was particularly concerned.

It is not possible to corroborate those stories. 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. It is also clear that one thing he told some interviewers -- that he was talking to a firefighter named Sean -- cannot be true. Sean O'Brien is certain he did not talk with Mr. Cullen on that Monday night. And it just as certain that he did not meet Mr. Cullen until late the next day, Tuesday, apparently for the first time.

Mr. Cullen's writing style tends to be sentimental, particularly in his columns about firefighters, military veterans and Irish or Irish-American characters around the city. He frequently includes scenes he witnessed, or events he is a part of, in his columns. In the columns we sampled that were not a part of the Marathon bombing coverage, Mr. Cullen featured people who were named and richly described, thus making reasonably clear to readers how he came to know the stories he was telling.

The columns about the bombing, however, particularly those in 2013 and then the anniversary column in 2018, lacked that clarity. As we discussed above, there were too many times when his story-telling approach could easily be misconstrued as eyewitness accounts. This is Mr. Cullen's failing. But it also is the failing of the editors who handled those pieces and did not insist that he make clear that he was either recalling television images or channeling the recollections of people who had truly been at the bombing site in 2013.

In newsrooms across America, columnists may get the lightest attention from editors because they are trusted and valued. Columnists, after all, earn those slots only after years of excellent and trustworthy performance. The Globe learned a painful lesson about lax editing in 1998 when two columnists left the paper after being caught fabricating material. As a result of that difficult experience, Globe editors put in place standards and practices to scrutinize columnists with the same rigor as the rest of the news report.

Had that rigor been applied in the Cullen work we've discussed, the Globe's readers would have been much better served.

And now we come to what is the most troubling episode – what to make of Mr. Cullen's long and dramatic tale, told four months after the intensity of the bombing week to an audience of journalism educators. This is the narrative of the deputy fire chief handing Mr. Cullen his cell phone on the night of the bombing and urging him to help persuade a troubled firefighter on the other end of the phone to leave his home and come join them for a drink.

It is clear from interviews with the firefighters Mr. Cullen has cited that the episode simply did not happen. Mr. Cullen's answer to our questions about it -- that he does not remember telling that story -- doesn't change the fact that he did, as the C-SPAN video attests.

The fact that Mr. Cullen did not himself seek and review that video, easily found, raised questions for us about how seriously he takes the inevitable conclusion that the story he told is a complete fabrication.

That is not a conclusion we reached easily, but it is where the facts direct us. He told that story in August of 2013. In that same time frame, he was writing a long chapter on the bombing week for an anthology titled *Our Boston*, published in October of 2013. In the chapter Mr. Cullen relates a similar story of the deputy fire chief trying in a phone conversation to coax a troubled firefighter out for a drink. But in this retelling, unlike the narrative he told to the journalism educators, Mr. Cullen is a witness at the end of the conversation, not a participant.

Kevin Cullen has had a long and distinguished career as a journalist, most of it at the Boston Globe. Other examples of his work, and interviews with editors who have supervised some of that work, paint a picture of a hard-working, diligent reporter who has been an important contributor to some of the most difficult stories in recent Boston history, from the FBI's blind eye to a mob killer who was their informant to the revelations of Catholic priests who sexually abused children and were protected by the church for decades.

The Marathon bombing columns and interviews, and particularly the not-believable tale he told in August of 2013, have now put a cloud over all his work. Some readers and colleagues may be willing to forgive or overlook his mistakes, perhaps seeing them as an aberration in an otherwise praiseworthy career. Others will find their trust in him eroded or gone, along with their acceptance of him as one of the Globe's signature columnist.

That trust may be reparable. But we don't believe the repair can begin until Globe readers receive a clear explanation of what happened and what steps The Globe will take to prevent a

recurrence. A critical part of that must be Mr. Cullen's genuine recognition of his responsibility for the failings described here.

## APPENDIX

1. Kevin Cullen's "[A perfect Day, then the unimaginable](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/04/15/perfect-day-turns-evil/W7KQHq1NWFqunkte3VQ14DJ/story.html)," Kevin Cullen's first column on the Marathon bombing, 4/16/13: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/04/15/perfect-day-turns-evil/W7KQHq1NWFqunkte3VQ14DJ/story.html>
2. Interview with BBC Ulster, morning of April 16, 2013: <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-22163363/family-tragedy-unfolds-in-boston-marathon-attacks>
3. Interview with BBC Radio 4, news presenter Martha Kearney, morning April 16, 2013: <https://audioboom.com/posts/1333778-boston-globe-columnist-kevin-cullen-s-account-of-aftermath-of-boston-marathon-bombs>
4. Interview with NewsTalk Breakfast host Seamus, morning April 16, 2013: [https://www.newstalk.com/podcasts/Newstalk Breakfast/Highlights from Newstalk Breakfast/15135/The aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings](https://www.newstalk.com/podcasts/Newstalk%20Breakfast/Highlights%20from%20Newstalk%20Breakfast/15135/The%20aftermath%20of%20the%20Boston%20Marathon%20bombings)
5. [Answering the call, in all its poignant horror](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/04/16/when-doing-your-job-more-than-doing-job/QOdqUtt5oeZREmbUmhbbJI/story.html), Cullen's column about a visit to the Broadway fire station where many of the firefighters had been at the bombing scene, 4/17/13: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/04/16/when-doing-your-job-more-than-doing-job/QOdqUtt5oeZREmbUmhbbJI/story.html>
6. Panel discussion before journalism educators, August, 2013: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4724702/kevin-cullen-boston-marathon>
7. "[Five years later, we feel the grief like a sixth sense](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/04/14/five-years-later-feel-grief-like-sixth-sense/WYBQA4KII3ILU00Z5YWstM/story.html)," Kevin Cullen's column for the fifth anniversary of the bombing, published April 14, 2018. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/04/14/five-years-later-feel-grief-like-sixth-sense/WYBQA4KII3ILU00Z5YWstM/story.html>