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When a Story Goes Terribly Wrong

How Newsweek botched its report on prisoner abuse—and helped set off an anti-U.S. firestorm

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Journalists strive to be influential. But there can't be many who would hope to affect events the way Newsweek has in Afghanistan. The anti-American street protests that erupted there earlier this month—after the magazine reported that a Pentagon investigation would support claims that guards at the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet—left as many as 17 dead and scores injured.

As it turned out, Muslim sensibilities and the U.S.'s image were not the only casualties. Even after retracting the Koran claim, Newsweek found itself in the center of the storm. In a note to the magazine's readers last week, editor Mark Whitaker said the report had been based on information from "a knowledgeable U.S. government source."

But, he went on, that source was no longer certain that he had read about the alleged incident in the still unreleased Pentagon report.

As Whitaker explained, the source now said that "it might have been in other investigative documents or drafts."

The retraction set off a firestorm in the blogosphere and on talk radio. The Bush Administration piled on too. White House press secretary Scott McClellan urged the magazine to help undo the damage to the U.S.'s image by pointing out ways in which "our United States military personnel go out of their way to make sure that the Holy Koran is treated with care." Newsweek wasn't the only media outlet feeling the heat. By inevitable extension, journalism in general was back under a shadow, its reputation already scuffed by a series of incidents, including the Jayson Blair debacle at the New York Times, the fall of Jack Kelley at USA Today, the dubious National Guard memos at CBS, Newsweek's use of a doctored photo of Martha Stewart on its cover, and CNN and TIME's 1998 retraction of the "Tailwind" story that claimed the U.S. had used nerve gas during a 1970 commando mission in Laos.

As he made the penitential rounds of radio, television and print interviews to acknowledge Newsweek's error, Whitaker initially insisted that journalistic standards had been maintained throughout the affair. "You can be professional in your reporting and still make mistakes," he told the Washington Post. "Everyone here did the right thing." He later told TIME, however, that "our safety net on this particular story was not strong enough, and we're taking steps to strengthen our net across the magazine."

Here's how the story unfolded. The inflammatory reference to the alleged toilet incident amounted to only a few words in an 11-sentence item in Newsweek's front-of-the-book "Periscope" section, in the issue that hit newsstands May 2. For more than two years, other news outlets had reported Guantanamo detainees' claims that U.S. guards had thrown the Koran to the floor and even tossed it into a latrine. But the Newsweek item went further by asserting that a Pentagon report would substantiate the alleged toilet incident as well as another in which a prisoner was led around on a dog leash.

According to Newsweek's accounts last week of how the article came about, Michael Isikoff, the magazine's best-known investigative reporter, became aware that a Pentagon probe was under way and phoned "a longtime reliable source, a senior U.S. government official who was

knowledgeable about the matter." The source told him that the report would contain the Koran incident. Looking for confirmation, Isikoff approached a spokesman for the Pentagon's Southern Command, which operates the Guantanamo prison. The spokesman declined to comment. John Barry, the magazine's national-security correspondent, took the unusual step of providing a draft of the item to a "senior Defense official." According to Newsweek's account, the official challenged one part of the article, which did not involve the Koran allegation, but "was silent about the rest." After revising the portion the official had challenged, Newsweek published the item.

Within days, news of its report spread throughout the Muslim world.

Protests erupted in Pakistan and Afghanistan, though how much was actually attributable to outrage over the Newsweek story is a matter of dispute. Opponents of the U.S.-supported government of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan may have seized on the report to stir up trouble. On May 12, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers said the U.S. military believed that the riots were not triggered by the Newsweek report. Six days later, he elaborated, stating that in the view of Lieut. General Karl Eikenberry, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, "the unrest had been previously planned" but that the Newsweek story "certainly wasn't helpful." First Lady Laura Bush, traveling to Jordan, said she thought the report had been only part of the cause.

Whatever the spark, after the disturbances broke out, the Pentagon reviewed details of its Guantanamo probe and concluded that investigators were not even examining the toilet-flushing allegation.

Defense Department spokesman Lawrence Di Rita called Newsweek on May 13 to say the story was wrong. Four days later, he told reporters there were no credible allegations of Koran abuse to look into. News professionals around the country were somewhat hesitant last week to second-guess Newsweek's editorial judgments. They don't need to be told that even the most conscientious among them can make an error. But many believe the magazine made a series of questionable judgments that together led it into trouble.

For one thing, Newsweek's "Periscope" section, which features newsy tidbits, is scrutinized less closely than the rest of the magazine.

Whitaker conceded last week that because those items are short and often develop late in the week, "there are one or two layers of editing and review that are not there," compared with articles elsewhere in the magazine. That's no excuse, says Daniel Okrent, who just ended an 18-month stint as "public editor"—basically, the internal critic—of the New York Times. "It doesn't say at the top of that page 'Stuff that we didn't check as much.'"

Newsweek was also playing with fire by relying on a single, anonymous source to support such a provocative claim. In this case, the source was presuming to describe a still unpublished report that neither the Newsweek correspondent nor the source possessed. "You're trying to predict what's going to be in a document that hasn't yet been written," says Nicholas Lemann, dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. "If you have one source who says, 'I'm sitting in an office right now looking at the report,' and then they read you the page, then I'd say, 'Can you fax it to me?' Under those conditions I'd be willing to go with one source."

Despite the potential problems with anonymous sources, news organizations aren't likely to stop using them anytime soon. There are too many people with essential information who are afraid to go public, sometimes out of fear of losing their jobs. (At present, TIME is defending in the courts the refusal of its correspondent Matthew Cooper to disclose one of his sources to a federal grand jury.) But many in the media, amid periodic waves of criticism, are re-examining how often to use unnamed sources. Some publications now are more aggressive about getting sources to agree to be identified. After the fall of USA Today's Kelley, who had fabricated quotes, people and whole

scenes, the paper adopted more stringent guidelines to ensure that anonymous sources be used only as a last resort and that their identity be made known to a senior editor. Some papers, including the Washington Post, routinely state in their stories why a source has declined to go on the record. Says Leonard Downie Jr., the Post's executive editor: "Then the readers can judge for themselves what to make of that information, the sources' motivation and our effort to get that information on the record." Whitaker says Newsweek is now strengthening its guidelines, adding: "We will have something to say about that very soon."

The magazine compounded its mistakes when reporter John Barry took the story to the Pentagon for confirmation and assumed he had it when the Pentagon did not raise objections to the Koran allegation. The Defense Department's silence, however, didn't amount to confirmation.

"There's a famous scene in the book *All the President's Men*," says Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism and former chief congressional correspondent for Newsweek. "Bernstein says to a source, 'If I count to whatever, and you stay on the phone and don't say anything, then I know the story is right.' Well, that's the story Woodward and Bernstein got wrong in Watergate."

There are some who argue that because of the story's potential to harm the U.S. abroad, Newsweek should not have published it, even if it were true. Robert Zelnick, chairman of Boston University's journalism department and a former Pentagon correspondent for ABC News, draws a distinction between Abu Ghraib, where there was a systematic pattern of prisoner abuse, and the allegation of an isolated act of Koran desecration at Guantanamo, however deplorable.

"In this case," he says, "I think the potential for mischief was so great and the journalistic value of the information so small that I would have made a decision not to go with it."

Zelnick acknowledges that that's a minority view in the news business. What most journalists are trying to take away from the debacle is a clearer sense of how best to report the news. It appears that some lessons, basic as they might be, need to be relearned. As a chastened Whitaker told TIME, "You have to be prepared to defend the accuracy of everything that appears in the magazine—no matter how short."