

The Fall of Journalist Jack Kelley and “The Hitler Diaries” Hoax

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USA Today Fabrications by Jack Kelley

Jack Kelley was a USA Today reporter and a Pulitzer finalist in 2002. Fellow journalists speculated about the accuracy of his stories, including coverage of Jerusalem and Cuban refuges. USA Today investigated the stories for plagiarism and falsifications.

The SPJ Ethics Code says a journalist should be “honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.” Journalists should provide citizens with correct and useful information. Kelley’s articles included exaggerated quotes from sources. He violated the ethics code to seek truth and report it because his stories were false and did not serve the public.

Although his fabricated stories were published, USA Today handled the situation effectively by publicly acknowledging the error. USA Today was transparent with their readers and accepted responsibility. The paper put Kelley on probation and eventually forced him to resign. Even though Kelley violated some ethics of journalism, the articles and Kelley were addressed in a quick and active way.

Fabrication of Hitler Diaries

Gerd Heidemann, a journalist from German magazine, *Der Stern*, pushed for the publication of “The Hitler Diaries,” a series of journals allegedly written by Adolf Hitler, which Heidemann marketed to various news organizations. London’s *Sunday Times* and the United States’ *Newsweek* published excerpts in 1983. The documents were quickly proven by historians, who utilized basic authentication techniques, to be forged by German swindler and Nazi memorabilia counterfeiter, Konrad Kujau.

If the principles of journalism as outlined in the SPJ Code of Ethics, including **1. a reliance on skepticism, 2. verification of the facts and 3. a hyperawareness of the circumstances and sources that the documents were said to have come from** were followed, the story would have never been published. It can be studied for its number of journalistic failures and serve as a lesson for the tremendous impact that a lack of caution can have on the individual journalist, the institution of journalism and most importantly, the public.