Michelle Delio Review

By Adam L. Penenberg

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On March 21, TechnologyReview.com, a publication operated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, posted retractions for two articles written by veteran freelance reporter Michelle Delio.

"Carly's Gone. HP Celebrates" (published Feb. 10, 2005) and "Carly's Way" (March 4, 2005) featured an anonymous Hungarian source with the initials "G.S.," who harshly criticized the way that former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina had run HP. The company challenged the stories, claiming it could not locate any former employees who matched Delio's description of her source. (In "Carly's Way," Delio described him as an electrical engineer who had emigrated from Hungary and was a research scientist at the Hewlett-Packard Imaging Systems Laboratory between 1975 and 2003.) As a result, Jason Pontin, *Technology Review's* editor in chief, asked Brad King, the website editor, to fact-check the piece.

Delio revealed the name of her source to King and offered a bio she said he gave her, but none of the professional organizations that G.S. listed had ever heard of him. When Delio could not produce a working telephone number for him -- she said he had stopped returning her calls -- Pontin ordered the retractions (http://www.technologyreview.com/articles/05/03/wo/wo_delio030405.asp?p=1) and pulled all of her stories from the site's archive.

In light of TechnologyReview.com's actions, Wired News appointed me to conduct a review of articles that Delio has written for the site. Over the span of a week, I was able to read through 160 stories. Here is my report.

Since January 2000, Delio has written 770 articles for Wired News (under Delio and before that, Finley, her name from a previous marriage), which averages out to approximately 150 stories a year. In addition to Wired News, her work has appeared in *InfoWorld*, Information Age and TechnologyReview.com. She is the author of *Tattoo: The Exotic Art of Skin Decoration*.

With the aid of two graduate assistants from New York University's department of journalism, I started the review with the most recent articles and worked backward through Wired's story archive. At the same time, Wired News reporters e-mailed me any pre-2004 stories they believed contained potential factual errors or relied on anonymous or unverifiable sources. I then went through the material, pulling out sources I could not confirm through Google, LexisNexis or via telephone directory services like 411.com. Then I planned to ask Delio for their contact information so I could check their quotes and any other material.

Assuming the reporter keeps complete records (i.e. interview notes, e-mails and full contact information for all sources) it should be a fairly straightforward procedure to fact-check an article, especially a tech story -- most of the people who would appear in it would have some sort of presence on the web. Sources would appear on the website of the company they were affiliated with, their résumé would be posted online, they would be quoted in other online news accounts or would have participated in archived online discussions.

One of the first articles we looked at was "Spyware on My Machine? So What," published on Dec. 6, 2004 (http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,65906,00.html). In it Delio claimed that not all web surfers believe spyware is a problem and that downloading it is a fair trade-off for free applications. While two of the technical sources in the piece checked out -- a senior security analyst at antivirus vendor Sophos and a marketing director for Blue Coat, a security vendor -- four other sources have not.

For example, Delio quoted Keith Caron, a "19-year-old New York University student." When we checked with NYU's registrar's office, we learned that no Keith Caron was enrolled at NYU, either now or last semester, when the story appeared. She also quoted Marilyn Jackson, an "unemployed Chicago-based graphic designer," but after calling every Marilyn Jackson listed in the Chicago area and performing multiple internet and database searches, we could not find her. Delio cited a computer security consultant based in Budapest named Yanos Kovas, but he, too, could not be located. There was also an anonymous Pennsylvania State University student whom Delio interviewed via e-mail.

We reviewed a Nov. 10, 2004 article titled "Patron Saint of the Nerds," (http://www.wired.com/news/roadtrip/riverroad/0,2704,65184,00.html) about a church in New Orleans that houses the "patron saint of hackers." Delio quoted Rev. Michael Amesse, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Chapel in New Orleans, as saying, "People who are computer experts or who work with computers do say Expedite is their patron saint. I don't know why they say Expedite is the computer saint. St. Isidore is the saint of technology and the internet. Yet these people insist on praying to Expedite. Like all things that concern this saint, it is a mystery."

When one of my assistants, Lauren Silva, a graduate student at NYU's Business and Economic Reporting program, contacted Rev. Amesse, he denied having spoken with Delio. "I don't remember ever talking to a person with that name and I didn't remember saying the quote," Amesse recounted. "The quote about the technology, I wouldn't even have known that. I don't even know that much about technology."

We also ran into difficulty tracking down a number of other sources that Delio quoted in a dozen stories published in 2004, including:

   * George Fedoro, a retired engineer from Boca Raton ("Florida to Tax Home Networks," June 24, 2004)

    * Keith Hitchens, who maintains networks for a Manhattan public relations firm, and John Vitelle, a Chicago-based systems administrator ("A Web of Electronic Denial," Apr. 28, 2004)

    * Martin Montez, who provides tech support for a major NYC electronics retailer; Mike Fenton, who works at Circuit City in New York; and Jeff Cunner, a software programmer who lives near Indianapolis ("Technology Resets the Clock," April 3, 2004)

    * New York middle-school teacher Keri Carnen and Bob Jern, an unemployed software developer ("Outsourcing Report Blames Schools," March 24, 2004)

    * Fred Nogolle, online game addict and Mark Venson, independent games programmer ("Multiplayer Games: Shards Unite!" March 22, 2004)

    * Mike Collins, who sells African masks at local flea markets; Jeff Carling, the owner of some carvings; 8-year-old Jason Fortell; and several anonymous sources ("What Have We Here? Junk, Mostly," March 15, 2004)

    * A person identified as "onlooker," a professor of statistical science at a New York university, and Nancy Heeden, graphic artist ("The Masters of Memory Lane," March 02, 2004)

    * Frank Calais, a New York network administrator, and Andy Dorkin, who manages a New York college's network ("New MyDoom Virus Packs a Wallop," Feb. 24, 2004)

* Matty Janko, a systems administrator, and Kenny Brown, who runs his own Chicago-based tech support service ("Adware Spreads Quickly on AOL IM," Feb. 11, 2004)

* Nick Bayless, a London-based network administrator ("Cheapskate's Guide to a Safe PC," Feb. 10, 2004)

* Joe Aldrama, who counsels companies and individuals on how to increase their efficiency ("Mood Ring Measured in Megahertz," Jan. 29, 2004)

A Wired News reporter wondered about a story Delio had written about her experiences at Ground Zero on the day of the World Trade Center attacks ("Searching for Life Amid Rubble," Sept. 12, 2001). According to Delio, a police officer "had been on the 82nd floor of one of the towers when it collapsed, and 'rode the building down to the ground.' His only injury is a broken left leg." According to snopes.com, which catalogs urban legends, it was an unsubstantiated rumor (http://www.snopes.com/rumors/survivor.htm), and Delio was not the only reporter to have written it at the time.

In the article, Delio quoted Mike Browning, "who escaped from the 39th floor of One World Trade Center just minutes before the building collapsed." But we were unable to confirm this, and Mike Browning's experiences have not been reported elsewhere. While there are several Mike Brownings that pop up in internet searches, none seems to fit the description of the one who worked in New York City in September 2001. My other assistant, Gergana Koleva, a graduate student in NYU's Portfolio program, contacted the three companies that had been housed on the 39th floor of WTC1 the day of the attacks, according to a list (http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/tenants1.html) of WTC1 tenants, but so far we have been unable to locate any Mike Brownings. Of course, it is possible he could have been visiting the Trade Center that day, perhaps on business with another company, or simply as a tourist.

Delio quoted a rescue worker, Fred Ferdel, but we have been unable to track him down. She interviewed a New York City policeman, Pat McGee, who does appear to exist, although we have not been able to speak directly with him. She also quotes another person, identified only by the last name McFalance, although this appears to be a copy-editing error. The piece reads as if McGee and McFalance could be the same person, or perhaps a paragraph that described McFalance had been inadvertently cut. (Note: Delio said she doesn't remember.):

"How will these towers ever be anything but a tomb after today?" said Pat McGee, a patrolman, as his eyes filled with tears.

"The military contacted all its people, and told those with medical skills, even retired members, to report for duty. We were told that hundreds of New York police, medical workers and firefighters had been killed when the towers imploded."

McFalance pointed to the many sections of rubber hoses, seemingly stripped from car engines, and the long strips of cloth covered with what looked like blood, that were lying on the streets. "We were using these for tourniquets earlier today," he said. "We were using whatever we could find, to try to save people."

Mike Browning, who escaped from the 39th floor of One World Trade Center just minutes before the building collapsed, sneaked through the police barricades a little after midnight to shake McFalance's hand and thank him. Browning said that he felt he had to come back and "see it again" before he'd be able to sleep. "That's assuming I will ever be able to sleep again," Browning said.

In another story connected to the 9/11 attack, "How to Thank Kenya for 9/11 Cows" (http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,52984,00.html) (published June 5, 2002), Delio reported on the gift of 14 cows to the people of the United States from members of a Masai tribe in Kenya.

She quoted Maureen Esposito, "who lost her husband, Joe, in the attacks," but when we consulted various lists of WTC victims (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-

srv/nation/specials/attacked/remembrance/vic_list.html), there was no Joe or Joseph Esposito. (Of course, it's possible that Joe and Maureen Esposito had different last names.) She also included a quote from Ibrahim Obajo, a freelance reporter working in Nairobi. If Obajo exists, he has never published any articles available through LexisNexis, and the only time he appears on Google is in Delio's story, which was picked up by a number of other websites. She also interviewed Ed McCormick, a construction worker from the Bronx. Although there are several Edward McCormicks in the white pages for New York City and surrounding boroughs, none is listed in the Bronx.

And in a colorful piece titled "Meet the Nigerian E-Mail Grifters" (July 17, 2002), Delio profiled a Nigerian student "who asked to be identified only as 'Taiwo' (the twin), who detailed the workings" of the so-called Nigerian e-mail scam in a Manhattan coffeeshop. Taiwo's uncle, who "asked to be identified only as 'Guy No Name,'" also appeared in the piece.

Stories that rely on anonymous sources are almost impossible to authenticate, although we found most of the material -- such as the "dirty money mago-mago" (deal), when the mark is shown a suitcase crammed with blackened paper and told it is money disguised so it can be smuggled out of the country -- on internet sites like Schemes, Scams, Frauds (http://www.crimes-of-persuasion.com/Nigerian/marked_currency.htm) and Nigerian vocabulary at NigeriaExchange (http://www.ngex.com/personalities/babawilly/dictionary/default.htm).

I contacted Delio and asked her to provide contact information for these people, including Taiwo, and to explain the discrepancy with Rev. Amesse, while I worked on pulling out sources from other articles.

In an e-mail dated March 25, Delio responded that she would check on Keith Caron, the NYU student -- "he works out at a gym my brother works at so I can find him, hopefully quickly," and promised to look for any notes she had on the cow story, but cautioned that "it's been a few years so may be hard to backtrack." She also said she would put together a source list for each story she published in 2004.

Meanwhile I read through a total of 160 stories, most from 2003 and 2004, but several from 2002 and a few from earlier. I culled 50 people in 24 articles that contained sources I could not confirm and e-mailed them to Delio. When she e-mailed her source list for 2004, she offered telephone numbers and e-mails for sources I didn't ask about, but did not offer contact info for the vast majority of the ones I did inquire about. In some cases she did provide telephone numbers and e-mail, but they have not checked out.

For example, Delio gave us a telephone number for Keith Caron and an e-mail address for Marilyn Jackson, both of whom are quoted in "Spyware on My Machine? So What?" We left numerous messages for Caron with a person who answered the phone but declined to give his name. When I did a reverse lookup at AnyWho.com, I found that the number is listed

under the name Fred Gorski (http://www.fairplaytv.com/nyttext.htm), a former female impersonator and cross-dresser consultant, who shows men how to act like women.

We received an auto response from the Marilyn Jackson e-mail, claiming the person whose account it was had gone to London, and could be reached through a local tattoo parlor. We contacted EarthLink, which would not tell us whose e-mail it was, although the customer service representative did confirm that the e-mail address was not registered to Marilyn Jackson. The phone number for Yanos Kovas, Hungarian computer security consultant, was "not in service."

Delio came to my office at NYU for a meeting on Tuesday, March 29, but did not carry her laptop, which I had requested she bring (she said it was broken) nor provide any additional contact information. She volunteered that she has "obviously been negligent" with keeping proper records of sources and perhaps "negligent in getting full backgrounder on every single source" she's ever used. The reason she didn't have any more contact information was that she kept e-mail interviews "for about a month" but then assumed that if no one wrote in to complain, then the piece was OK and there was no need to keep documentation. She also said as a rule she didn't keep notes or source lists.

During our hour-long meeting, I asked about each source one by one, but Delio could only provide information about one, Kimeli Naiyomah, a Masai tribesman studying in New York who could be found on Google. She did not know why Keith Caron did not return our calls, why Yanos Kovas' number had been disconnected nor what his new number was, and she didn't know how to find him. When I informed her that EarthLink had confirmed that the e-mail address she had given us for Marilyn Jackson was not registered to anyone of that name, Delio said that perhaps it was the e-mail of a friend of hers who had introduced her to Marilyn Jackson.

I asked Delio how she had met Ed McCormick, whom she quoted in the article about Kenyan Masai tribesmen giving the United States a gift of 14 cows, and she said that while she was working on the story, McCormick was doing construction outside her building. Realizing she needed a quote, she told him about the cows and asked what he thought about it. According to Delio, he said, "The cows are the most amazing gift we received -- I mean, who else sent cows? If those guys wanted us to have jewelry, they would have sent it. They wanted us to have cows. We should take the cows and raise them on a nice farm upstate and then send the cow puppies back to them some day."

But McCormick had known nothing of the Masai gift before Delio told him about it, and she didn't see anything wrong with this.

What about the confusion between the names McGee and McFalance in the 9/11 piece? She said she couldn't remember.

And Taiwo? She had no idea where he was. She assumed he had left the country.

As for Rev. Amesse, she explained that she had "misattributed" his quote. She met a reverend at the church and hadn't planned to quote him, but then realized he had said very interesting things. Instead of calling the church and confirming the quote, she asked a friend of hers, who, based on a description Delio gave him, told her he must be Rev. Amesse.

Before we adjourned the meeting, Delio promised to continue to look for these missing sources, but because she has not kept full records, she said she wasn't very hopeful.

The next day I came across the article "Enterprise Collaboration With Blogs and Wikis," (http://www.infoworld.com/article/05/03/28/13FEblogwiki_1.html?s=feature) which she had just written for *InfoWorld*, published on March 28, 2005. I quickly went through it and extracted two sources I couldn't immediately identify: Edward Williams, head of the fraud and security department at a consumer bank, and technical support consultant Mike Andrews. I e-mailed Delio and said, "OK, so you say you don't have contact info from last year or earlier. But I came across this very recent *InfoWorld* article, dated yesterday. You list two sources, Edward Williams and Mike Andrews. Send me their contact info ASAP, including a tel. #, e-mail, etc. Which companies do they work for -- or what companies do they head?"

When I didn't hear back, I re-sent the message. I asked four times for these sources, but Delio had not responded by the time this report was submitted.

In the meantime, *InfoWorld* reposted the story with a correction: "This article has been modified from its original version. Certain quoted material has been removed because its veracity could not be confirmed."

The "quoted material" the editors refer to involved Edward Williams and Mike Andrews.

For the record, Delio denies she has fabricated anything, and makes a distinction between primary sources and secondary ones. "I can locate all of the material sources," she said. "Show me one significant source that I cited in a story who has not checked out. But no, I can't find people who I exchanged an e-mail or two with months or years ago who made a colorful or supporting comment or who I saw for a few moments at an event."

It is true that Delio's primary sources do check out. It's a number of her secondary sources, who often seem to have common names like Mike, Bob, George or Keith, and who are given vague descriptions like "a graphic artist in Chicago," "a retired engineer from Boca Raton" or "Florida chiropractor," that have not. But secondary sources by their very nature have less of an impact on a story than primary sources do.

Below is a list of stories and the sources we can't confirm, based on a sample of 160 articles written by Michelle Delio for Wired News.

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1. "Spyware on My Machine? So What?"
(http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,65906,00.html)(Dec. 06, 2004)

Keith Caron, 19-year-old NYU student; anonymous Pennsylvania State University student; Marilyn Jackson, graphic artist in Chicago; Yanos Kovas, Hungarian security consultant based in Budapest.

2. "Patron Saint of the Nerds"
(http://www.wired.com/news/roadtrip/riverroad/0,2704,65184,00.html) (Nov. 10, 2004)

Rev. Michael Amesse, who denies ever speaking with Delio.

3. "Minniapple's Mini Radio Stations"
(http://www.wired.com/news/roadtrip/riverroad/0,2704,65137,00.html)(Oct. 08, 2004)

Jeff Barrone, Radio Re-Revolt participant.

4. "Florida to Tax Home Networks"
(http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,63962,00.html) (June 24, 2004)

George Fedoro, a retired engineer who now lives in Boca Raton.

5. "Nasty Malware Fouls PCs With Porn"
(http://www.wired.com/news/infostructure/0,1377,63280,00.html) (April 30, 2004)

Maria DelGiorno, 67-year-old great-grandmother, and Joe DelGiorno, her grandson.

6. "A Web of Electronic Denial"
(http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,63240,00.html) (April 28, 2004)

Keith Hitchens, who maintains networks for a Manhattan public relations firm and a magazine-publishing business; John Vitelle, a Chicago-based systems administrator.

7. "Technology Resets the Clock"
(http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,62912,00.html) (April 3, 2004)

Martin Montez, tech support, major NYC electronics retailer; Mike Fenton, who works at Circuit City in New York; Jeff Cunner, a software programmer who lives near Indianapolis.

8. "Outsourcing Report Blames Schools"
(http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,62780,00.html) (March 24, 2004)

New York middle-school teacher Keri Carnen; Bob Jern, unemployed software developer.

9. "Multiplayer Games: Shards Unite!"
(http://www.wired.com/news/games/0,2101,62736,00.html) (March 22, 2004)

Fred Nogolle, a self-described online game addict; Mark Venson, independent games programmer.

10. "What Have We Here? Junk, Mostly"
(http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,62667,00.html)(March 15, 2004)

Anonymous man with a collection of "Stone Age tools" that were dismissed as worn limestone chunks; Mike Collins, who sells African masks at local flea markets; Jeff Carling, the owner of some carvings; anonymous collector with specimen boxes of "beautifully preserved 100-million-year-old lizards"; generous soul, who "brought in a large furry tarantula and told the scientists they could keep it"; and 8-year-old Jason Fortell.

11. "The Masters of Memory Lane"
(http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,62492,00.html) (March 02, 2004)

Onlooker who identified himself as a professor of statistical science at a New York university; Nancy Heeden, graphic artist.

12. "New MyDoom Virus Packs a Wallop"
(http://www.wired.com/news/infostructure/0,1377,62401,00.html) (Feb. 24, 2004)

Frank Calais, a New York network administrator.

13. "AOL Peeved by Adware Outbreak"
(http://www.wired.com/news/infostructure/0,1377,62275,00.html) (Feb. 13, 2004)

Andy Dorkin, who manages a New York college's network.

14. "Adware Spreads Quickly on AOL IM"
(http://www.wired.com/news/infostructure/0,1377,62251,00.html) (Feb. 11, 2004)

Matty Janko, a systems administrator; Kenny Brown, who runs his own Chicago-based tech support service.

15. "Cheapskate's Guide to a Safe PC"
(http://www.wired.com/news/infostructure/0,1377,62222,00.html) (Feb. 10, 2004)

Nick Bayless, London-based network administrator.

16. "Mood Ring Measured in Megahertz"
(http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,62069,00.html)(Jan. 29, 2004)

Joe Aldrama, who counsels companies and individuals on how to increase their efficiency.

17. "Promise of Eternal Youth Dashed"
(http://www.wired.com/news/roadtrip/0,2640,61355,00.html)(Nov. 26, 2003)

Anonymous park guide, who asked that his name be withheld "since he was not espousing the standard tour spiel"; Charles Arkon, Florida chiropractor.

18. "Clocked by Two Smoking Barrels"
(http://www.wired.com/news/roadtrip/0,2640,61221,00.html) (Nov. 18, 2003)

Mick Adams, Atlanta-based computer programmer; and Mary Clark, from Athens, Georgia.

19. "Meet the Nigerian E-Mail Grifters"
(http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,53818,00.html)(July 17, 2002)

Taiwo, pseudonym for an anonymous Nigerian scam artist, and his uncle, "Guy No Name."

20. "How to Thank Kenya for 9/11 Cows"
(http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,52984,00.html) (June 5, 2002)

Maureen Esposito, who lost her husband, Joe, in the attacks; Ibrahim Obajo, a freelance reporter working in Nairobi; Ed McCormick, a construction worker from the Bronx.

21. "Read the F***ing Story, Then RTFM"
(http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,52901,00.html) (June 4, 2002)

Carmella Esposito, United Nations translator.

22. "Klez: Hi Mom, We're No. 1"
(http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,52765,00.html) (May 24, 2002)

New York graphics artist Sid Rubin.

23. "Searching for Life Amid
Rubble" (http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,46756,00.html) (Sept. 12, 2001)

Fred Ferdel, rescue worker; Pat McGee and McFalance; Mike Browning; anonymous policeman and fireman.

24. "CD Program Making Users Burn"
(http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,43625,00.html) (May 8, 2001)

Jack Olson, a tech support rep with Servsupport in Texas; Darren Smith, a support
technician at CompUSA.

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