

This is the Vox Media Peer Review Group report concerning the SBNation.com story “Who Is Daniel Holtzclaw?” The Peer Review Group began its work two days after the publication of the Holtzclaw story in February 2016, and submitted a final draft of this report to the SBNation.com senior leadership on April 4. The final report was submitted to leadership on May 26.

On May 26, SBNation.com released the report to its audience [along with this note](#).

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VOX MEDIA PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT ON THE DANIEL HOLTZCLAW STORY

“A complete failure.”

That’s what SBNation.com editorial director Spencer Hall called a feature story that had been published on the site — and subsequently pulled — in a February 17 note to readers.

And it was.

Headlined “Who is Daniel Holtzclaw?” the 12,000-word piece was an attempt to delve into the life and motivations of a man who, in December 2015, had been convicted of raping multiple black women while on duty as an Oklahoma City police officer. Built around exclusive interviews with Holtzclaw’s friends and family, the story positioned the convicted rapist as a former college football player with dashed NFL dreams. Its tone was highly sympathetic to Holtzclaw, and it largely glossed over his crimes and his victims.

The story itself, and the controversy surrounding its publication, devastated and humiliated staffers at SB Nation and throughout Vox Media, infuriated readers, and heaped a considerable (and deserved) amount of negative attention on SB Nation and the company in general.

The people hurt by this incident, both inside and outside Vox Media, wanted to know how it happened and what SB Nation could do to make sure it doesn’t happen again. At the direct invitation of the SB Nation senior leadership team, with support from Vox Media CEO Jim Bankoff, Vox Media editorial director Lockhart Steele convened a Peer Review Group of editorial leaders within the organization — Recode executive editor Kara Swisher, Eater executive editor Helen Rosner, and Vox.com managing editor Lauren Williams — and a well-regarded editor and journalist from outside the company, Douglas McGray, editor in chief of the California Sunday Magazine and Pop-Up Magazine.

The five of us undertook the work as a group with the full cooperation and support of SB Nation’s team. Our charge was to investigate the structural, editorial, and communication issues that led to SB Nation’s publication of the story, and provide recommendations to help prevent another incident like this. This document is a result of the Peer Review Group’s work.

Our group spent a month interviewing SBNation.com editors, compiling statements from team members throughout the SB Nation network, and meeting frequently to discuss and analyze our findings. We spoke to everyone directly involved in the publication of the story — as well as people indirectly involved — and made ourselves available to anyone at SB Nation who had something to share, regardless of their connection to SBNation.com or the Holtzclaw story.

One key person we interviewed is Glenn Stout, who was the editor of the piece and the head of SBNation.com’s “Longform” unit. His title was features editor; his department within the site was responsible for producing a high-quality feature story every week — distinct from other feature stories elsewhere on SBNation.com. On February 18, the day after the Holtzclaw story was published, the decision was made by Bankoff to temporarily suspend the Longform program. Stout was placed on paid leave on February 19, the same day this group began its investigation. A few days later, Stout’s employment was terminated. The Peer Review Group as a whole was not involved in that decision, which was made by SB Nation senior editorial staff with support from Vox Media senior leadership.

While the specific failures of the Holtzclaw story relate directly to this report, the Peer Review Group also looked at larger systemic issues at SBNation.com under the leadership of editorial director Spencer Hall and vp of SB Nation editorial operations Kevin Lockland.

(The terminology here can get confusing. SB Nation includes 300-plus individual websites, most of which are dedicated to specific teams, leagues, and topics and have their own names and, in many cases, URLs. Despite its name, SBNation.com — referred to internally as “dot-com” — is just one site within the SB Nation universe, and Hall only had oversight of the content that was written explicitly for the SBNation.com site.)

This report is divided into two sections. We begin with a comprehensive timeline of the Holtzclaw story, based largely on interviews, email records, and other primary sources. The goal with this was to agree as a group on the facts before proceeding further. The second section is an analysis of the structural and operational problems that the timeline reveals; its scope is organized from narrow to broad, moving from the specifics of the Longform program to general SB Nation editorial structure and staffing to overall issues of diversity and sensitivity. Within each segment of our analysis, we’ve included recommendations that we hope will help fix existing problems and prevent new ones from forming. By design, we don’t provide a roadmap for implementing those recommendations — ultimately, it’s up to the leadership at both SB Nation and Vox Media as a whole to decide how to move forward from here.

The mandate of the Peer Review Group was to identify and suggest fixes to the flawed systems at SBNation.com, with the goal of making SBNation.com — and indeed all of SB Nation, and perhaps all Vox Media publications — stronger and better.

The Timeline

On December 11, 2015, Chicago-based freelance journalist Jeff Arnold pitched Glenn Stout a story about a recently convicted rapist named Daniel Holtzclaw — a former Oklahoma City police officer who also, incidentally, played college football.

Arnold's note was brief:

Glenn,

I hope you're well.

I'm wondering if there is a story for SB Nation with the sad tale of Daniel Holtzclaw, the former OKC cop who was just convicted on 18 counts of an array of charges. I covered Daniel at Eastern Michigan for four years and find it interesting how in the matter of less than 10 years, he goes from All-American linebacker to shamed cop who is now looking at 260 years in prison for what he apparently did to 13 women while on duty as a cop. It would take a lot of digging and sensitive storytelling, but I think there is a long and winding story there.

On December 18, Stout took the pitch to SBNation.com editorial director Spencer Hall, who regularly approved Stout's story ideas for Longform. Hall recalls that when Stout presented him with the pitch, he thought, "We've done good work on stories on sexual assault before. I see no reason why this can't work." Hall asked Stout whether Arnold was qualified to write a story like this, since he had not previously tackled such complex and controversial material.

Stout assured Hall that he was. "Jeff had known the guy," says Stout. "He covered Eastern Michigan, so he had contacts. I considered him a decent writer and a good reporter. Not a spectacular writer, but he was a good reporter. I was like, 'This should probably work.'" Hall approved the story.

The story then progressed through the standard Longform editorial protocol that had been approved by both Hall and Lockland: Following Hall's approval of the pitch, Stout and Arnold worked together on the story; no one else at SBNation.com saw it until nearly eight weeks later, on Thursday, February 11. On that day, Stout circulated Arnold's completed draft via email to a group of editors who typically received Longform's final drafts: Hall, Lockland, editorial engineer Graham MacAree, senior editor Kurt Mensching, engagement editor Michael Katz, and managing editor Brian Floyd. With the exception of Hall, none of these editors was previously aware of the assignment, and Hall knew only what Stout had shared with him in their initial conversation.

In his email introducing the piece to the editors, Stout described the work as "a complicated but I think fascinating story, one that is both fair and respectful of the victims, compassionate toward

the family and friends, yet does not take issue with the conviction, or speculate wildly. In a story that involves both race and sex and politics, I think we've successfully negotiated that intersection." At the end of the email, Stout wrote that the story was ready for proofing and was set to publish on Wednesday, February 17, six days later — the usual weekly timing for Longform pieces.

Kurt Mensching, who generally copyedited Stout's Longform stories, was the first person at SBNation.com to give the piece a deep read, the day after receiving his email. The story was unusually long — 12,000 words, compared with what Stout describes as about 5,000 for a typical Longform assignment — and Mensching spent much of the morning and afternoon working on it. He recalls that he did not like the story; he says that typically he would read a story three times — once for spelling and grammar, once for factual accuracy, and once to check his work — but he only read this one twice.

"It's just a really, really bad story," Mensching says. But he adds that he didn't feel it was his place to share those feelings with Stout or editorial leadership — addressing the issues with the story, he says, was "above his pay grade." So he sent it back to Stout with minor copy editing notes.

Hall, who was on vacation, says he skimmed the piece that Friday as well, and noticed some issues, but he did not act. Instead, he says he trusted that Floyd and SBNation.com senior editor Elena Bergeron — who was not on Stout's original email filing the story, because she was generally not part of the standard Longform workflow — would work with Stout on fixing them. In Hall's absence, Floyd and Bergeron were the two most senior members of the editorial staff.

"Our typical divide in our dual editorial structure has been Brian [handles] content management," says Hall. "And in my stead, Elena was going to perform the working with writers, talking to them, coming up with ideas. Whether that was clearly communicated or not — I don't think it was, obviously."

On Sunday, a third person looked at the story: Graham MacAree, an editorial engineer who oversaw design and production for Stout's stories. MacAree built out the design; then, on Monday morning, he refined it and forwarded the story to Bergeron. It wasn't typical for Bergeron to review Longform features, but SBNation.com editors often asked her to advise them on sensitive or controversial stories. Floyd had not yet read the story, but given the subject matter, he also forwarded the draft to Bergeron that morning. She didn't get to it until later in the afternoon. Once she did, she was horrified.

"I sat down and I read it twice because I was trying to get my mind around [how Stout described the story in his email] versus what it was. And in my opinion it wasn't a strong journalistic piece," she says. "Not even to mention the numerous problems with language, with tone, with angle — to me the overarching problem is that if you know you're going to do a sensitive story, or a story

that's going to be controversial, from the outset there needs to be a really compelling reason why you're doing it. And I didn't think that that was there."

At 9:30 Monday night, Bergeron sent an email to Stout, with Floyd copied (and Lockland blind copied), explaining some of her concerns with the story and identifying one particular passage that illustrated the overall problems. She wrote:

I know that you believe that this story shows a three-dimensional portrait of Daniel Holtzclaw and offers insight into the circumstances which potentially could offer an explanation for how he turned into a sexual predator, but I don't think this piece focuses itself well or with reasonable rigor on resolving the dynamics of his personality. [...] I worry that, in present form, this story makes it seem like we've devoted an extreme amount of time and space to wondering how this happened to a man who once had NFL dreams, rather than an exploration of how the people around him are resolving the Daniel they knew with the one who was convicted in a court of law.

Early the next morning, the day before the story was supposed to publish, Stout replied — only to Floyd — asking, "So what's the expectation here in regard to Holtzclaw? It's quite something to get a note like that from Elena five days after the story has been turned in and one day before it's running." In the course of the lengthy email, he defended the story against Bergeron's concerns, eventually conceding to a slight rewording of the specific paragraph she had identified.

Floyd said he'd call Stout shortly and then sat down to read the piece. "I read it in a fairly hasty fashion just to get a general idea before I talked to him," he said. Then Floyd spoke with Stout. "He was pretty forceful about wanting it to [publish]," Floyd recalls. "And I think he was imposing his own pace" to push the story through.

After his conversation with Stout, Floyd says he finally read the story more thoroughly. That time, "I had some concerns with it, too," he says. Floyd arranged a conference call with Bergeron and Stout for 4 pm, the soonest they would all be free to discuss the story.

"There were no signposts of, 'Oh, my gosh, this is unpublishable?'" Stout recalls of his conversation with Floyd. "Nothing remotely like that was ever uttered to me. Not even close." Stout did email Arnold, however. The subject line of the email read "Important from Glenn":

Just a heads up, but I got some blowback on the story today, which I am vigorously defending. You available if I need you? Most of it stems from one person's reaction who thinks the story should have been about the friends and family, which I find absurd. I think it will be fine, but just in case, shoot me your # and availability, or give me a call.

Arnold and Stout spoke on the phone shortly thereafter. Arnold recalls Stout dismissing Bergeron's objections while also not communicating them specifically to Arnold (who was

worried and, he says, willing to make changes). According to Arnold's recounting, Stout's description of the conflict — unbeknownst to Arnold — mischaracterized both Bergeron's seniority and her reasoning.

"He described it more as, 'This is a lower-level editor who is a climber,'" says Arnold. "He's like, 'This happens a couple of times a year. People try to make a stink about a story as a way of making me look bad.' That's the way that he played it off, as, like, 'Hey, this is who it is. She's a female, and she's pretty opposed to the angle of the story that we're taking.'"

Stout disputes this. "I wouldn't have described her as a climber," he says. "I didn't even know what her position was. I have no idea to this day."

Meanwhile, MacAree was finalizing art and layout. "I did the deep read on Tuesday and started being quite worried about it," he says. He messaged Bergeron with his concerns, and she told him she was scheduled to speak with Floyd and Stout later that day. In the hours before then, MacAree and Bergeron "had a long discussion while I was working on [the story layout]," MacAree said. "I tried to kind of mitigate the effects [of the story's inadequacies] by adding videos of the victims and their perspective up near the top. And then we just prepared for a huge rebound after their call at 4."

Accounts of that call are wildly divergent.

Bergeron and Floyd both describe the call as unpleasant, condescending, and ultimately unproductive, with Stout unwilling to hear Bergeron's concerns. Floyd describes Stout's attitude as "forceful and disrespectful," and says he seemed intent on pushing the story through with no changes. Bergeron recalls that as she went through the story beat by beat, "every point, Glenn had a rebuttal to, or he would just start talking over me, which made me angrier than it did anything else." She describes the call as a series of stalemates: She would bring up an issue, Stout would defend it, and she'd say something like, "No, I understand what you're saying. I don't think this achieves what you're saying." And then Floyd, who adopted the role of mediator, would suggest they move on to the next point, in most cases without resolution.

"After we got off the phone Brian called me back, and we were just both flabbergasted," says Bergeron. "It was like a cyclone hit — '*What just happened?*'"

Stout perceived the call very differently. "It seems to be Brian has already decided it's okay, based on what he said that morning, and we're having this discussion as a courtesy, as we should," he says. He recalls the conversation, which lasted 10 to 15 minutes, as awkward but not combative. "We discussed that center section, we discussed the changes being made, and we said goodbye," he says. "This was not an argument. I've had arguments before, and this was not an argument."

Floyd notes that he felt he had to give in to Stout, even though he had the power to stop publication. “In this case, I do feel like he held all power over both of us,” he says. “It felt like we really couldn't do anything. We tried to pinpoint [to] get our way in, to pick a spot to try to get change, instead of getting broad change. Then we focused on, ‘Let's see if we can focus this and this and this’ and try to chip away. We picked out specific parts to try to gain concessions.”

Floyd now says he regrets this approach and wishes he had been more forceful. “That's what I should have done. I didn't feel that I had the power to do that in that situation,” he says. He describes it as “weighing the risks in my head of upsetting the Longform editor, who will raise hell, versus letting a story go through, [one that] maybe, if we made some changes, it will be a not-great story, but it won't be a fatal story.”

Stout had emailed the two agreed-upon changes to Floyd and Bergeron, and they were edited into the story. In response, Bergeron sent Stout an email reading, “Works for me. Thanks for being so receptive!” — a reply that Bergeron tells us was meant as sarcasm, as she felt that he hadn't been open to making changes. “There was nothing else I was going to get out of an interaction with Glenn,” she said. “I just wanted to be done with speaking to him.”

But Stout took the email at face value. “I read it that she was okay with it. And if it was supposed to be snarky and meaning the other thing, I think that's a very odd thing to do,” says Stout.

Toward the end of the day, Stout wrote an email to Arnold, one that the writer says surprised him. Stout to Arnold:

We won, as I knew we would. I agreed to make two inconsequential changes (below) the first to satisfy a question, the second because we'd used the Pater quote up top. Story runs tomorrow and looks GREAT.

And so the story published on SBNation.com the next day as scheduled: Wednesday, February 17, at 12 pm ET.

Bergeron, MacAree, and Mensching all separately recall feeling that the story would be poorly received. The actual magnitude of the backlash, however, was greater than any of the editorial staff expected. Reader response was so swift and so outraged that SB Nation leadership understood something needed to be done quickly, but it took several hours for the editors to come to a consensus on what to do. At around 4 pm, Floyd and Hall agreed to pull the story from the site — a decision Stout disagreed with, but accepted.

An hour later, Hall published an editor's note on SBNation.com:

Earlier today, SB Nation posted a story called "Who is Daniel Holtzclaw?" that attempted to find out the backstory of convicted serial rapist Daniel Holtzclaw. The story focused on his football background in particular.

The publication of this story represents a complete breakdown of a part of the editorial process at SB Nation. There were objections by senior editorial staff that went unheeded. It was tone-deaf, insensitive to the victims of sexual assault and rape, and wrongheaded in approach and execution. There is no qualification: it was a complete failure.

In light of that failure, we've taken the story down. I take full responsibility for this as editorial director. It was not up to our standards as a website. It was not up to our standards as a part of Vox Media. It is not reflective of our ideals, or who we want to be as an organization in the future.

We're reviewing all of our processes in light of this failure. There are a lot of them, and I promise to talk in detail about them publicly while we work through all of them.

Why it happened and recommendations

While it may have appeared that the publication of the Holtzclaw story was met with a monolithic wall of outrage, there were many people who were unable to see the story's failings.

It seems nearly impossible to extricate the issues of race, gender, and abuse of power from a profile of Daniel Holtzclaw. A man of racial and institutional privilege (Holtzclaw's father is white, and his mother is Japanese), he terrorized the black women he was sworn, as a police officer, to protect, choosing them as victims because he believed he could intimidate them into silence. Yet "Who Is Daniel Holtzclaw?" manages to gloss over these issues almost completely.

The story periodically acknowledges its subject's guilt, but its overall structure, language choices, and underlying reporting more frequently have the effect of either casting doubt on the criminal charges of which Holtzclaw was convicted or portraying Holtzclaw himself as a victim. The story gives significant space to unsubstantiated speculation about what external factors might have "driven" a police officer to rape numerous women, barely addresses the specifics of the horrible crimes of which he was convicted, and relies heavily on extensive interviews with people who dispute the validity of his conviction while almost entirely excluding the voices of his victims.

It fits into a familiar model: an in-depth, humanizing character portrait of a suspect or criminal — usually one who's white. If a publication takes on a story like this, its editors should be particularly cautious about making sure the piece doesn't end up erasing the subject's victims or crimes, as happened here.

The above timeline outlines the series of events that led to such a story being published on SBNation.com. In this section, we analyze the broader systems and practices that, working together, led to the publication of such an editorially irresponsible piece.

1. The Longform vertical

The Longform vertical was conceived in 2012 by Kevin Lockland and Jim Bankoff, with the idea that it would be a home for SBNation.com's most ambitious reporting. And while Stout, the vertical's only editor and a venerated figure in the sports journalism world, frequently did produce some of the site's most celebrated pieces, the way he was either encouraged or permitted to work was risky.

TURNAROUND TIME

Longform published one feature a week, usually on Wednesday; only on very rare occasions did Stout skip a week. That's a grueling pace for one editor, working alone, with no staff writers and a limited budget; it's a furious rate of output that's not conducive to consistently excellent reporting and editing. In the case of a potentially controversial story, working quickly and cheaply with no meaningful input from peers or supervisors has the potential to put everyone's professional reputation at risk.

Any 12,000-word story that addresses rape, race, and abuse of police power is bound to be sensitive. In the working environment SBNation.com created around Longform, it was explosive. The piece had a fast turnaround — for Stout, who from pitch to publication spent about eight weeks working with the writer, and especially for the SBNation.com team members who assisted in readying it for publication, who had between two and four workdays with the piece prior to scheduled publication.

In his email to Floyd the day after Bergeron's concerns were raised, Stout complained about Bergeron's late-breaking criticism, writing, "If people had concerns about this story, why was that not communicated to me days ago? That's the whole point of getting stories in early." In our estimation, filing a story of this length — on this subject matter — six days before publication (four workdays, excluding the weekend) does not reasonably constitute "early."

Recommendation:

- If SBNation.com chooses to continue to have a dedicated longform feature program, make sure the posting schedule and budget offer enough time, resources, and flexibility for editors to carefully edit, vet writers, and hold stories if necessary.

UNILATERAL EDITORIAL DECISION-MAKING

Throughout our interviews, several SBNation.com editors referred to Longform as Stout's personal fiefdom, meaning he ran Longform as a largely independent department within SB Nation. ("The Longform program was Glenn Stout's blog," says Bankoff.) Only a very small group of people — sometimes just Stout and Hall — knew what stories were in the Longform pipeline.

While Stout and Hall had to agree on a pitch for Stout to make an assignment, once the assignment was underway, Hall allowed Stout to edit as he saw fit and publish as he wanted (and, Stout says, Lockland told him he could overrule Hall if he wanted to). That's a highly unusual amount of autonomy when the product is a long, reported, and potentially controversial feature, which at most other publications would be read by at least one other editor, often many more. No one questioned Stout's calls, including his bosses.

In the case of the Holtzclaw story, Floyd only read the piece closely because Bergeron flagged it as problematic. Typically he wouldn't read Longform stories before they went online. Floyd says the only editor who could be counted on to read a Longform feature before publication, aside from Stout, was Mensching, who copy edited all of the Longform stories.

Recommendations:

- Require all significant stories to be read by more than one person. Require multiple editors to read longer stories, even if there is one primary editor.
- Clearly communicate that all editors involved with a story (including copy editors and fact-checkers) are empowered to question reporting, including tone, and raise objections.

INDIVIDUAL ISOLATION

Stout was allowed by his managers to be unusually isolated from his colleagues. While SBNation.com's team of bloggers and editors are geographically scattered, they come together in Slack, the company's primary mode of internal communication, which serves as a de facto virtual office. Stout, who lives in Vermont, rarely participated in Slack (and was not compelled to by Hall or Lockland), and very rarely saw or spoke to co-workers besides Hall. He interacted with both Mensching and MacAree, but both editors characterize their relationships with Stout as impersonal and transactional.

As to why he did not use Slack regularly, Stout says: "When I first started hearing about Slack, I had no idea even what it was. And then the edict came down that we have to go on Slack. And I had to find out what it was. And I would use it occasionally, but I'm just much more comfortable with emails."

Stout's autonomy and isolation contributed to other SBNation.com editors feeling a sense of distance from Stout personally and from the rules and expectations that governed his department. In the four years that SB Nation published Longform, more than 100 features were assigned, but only one, Hall says, was ever killed. (In Stout's recollection, several pieces were.)

To Floyd and Bergeron, the editors in charge in Hall's absence, even delaying publication of the Holtzclaw story seemed like a drastic measure, and maybe not an option. While there had been no explicit diktat from Lockland and Hall about this, it was widely felt by the staff that Stout's work was not to be touched.

Recommendations:

- Management should require remote employees to integrate into office culture. Do not cultivate or aid editorial isolation.
- Everyone on the team should be using the same platforms — if the whole team communicates primarily via Slack, the whole team should be on Slack for work purposes.

2. Editorial structure and staffing

SB Nation began as a series of blogs. As it has expanded its scope, launching SBNation.com and growing to a massive overall audience size of more than 80 million people a month, editorial leadership — at both SB Nation and Vox Media — has not fully scaled its editorial structure. This has led to organizational chart and hierarchy confusion, as well as a staff well versed in blogging but not as experienced overall in other forms of journalism. It's our belief that if editorial roles had been more clearly expressed to the team members involved in this story, the story might not have been published.

CHAIN OF COMMAND

The SBNation.com org chart is seldom communicated to staff members; our interviews revealed conflicting accounts of roles and reporting structure.

This confusion increased with Hall out of the office. Although Hall describes Floyd and Bergeron as his key deputies in the newsroom, what exactly that means — or if everyone on staff understands their roles in the same way — remains unclear. It is also unclear who, in Hall's absence, has authority to make, and overrule, important editorial calls. According to SB Nation's org chart, Floyd, Bergeron, and Stout are all equally senior. With Hall on vacation, Floyd assumed a de facto lead role, but in practice that oversight did not extend to Longform.

Asked why he thought senior staffers felt they couldn't overrule Stout, Hall told us, "I think people didn't know how. ... We have a very tight, personality-based workplace. And I think sometimes if you don't know that person — people didn't feel like there was a formal way to do it."

As a result, although he did have the authority to veto Stout in Hall's absence, Floyd says he did not feel empowered to deal with the objections that Bergeron raised once she got the piece from him. (Overall chain of command issues at SBNation.com are not limited to Longform, and structural issues such as these lead to communication issues as well. When editors see problems with stories, they often don't know whom to escalate them to in a way that will be effective.)

Recommendations:

- Outline clear chains of command to staff, make sure everyone knows who his or her manager is, and ensure that managers in charge of editorial decisions have the right tools and skills for the job.
- Regularly communicate to staff any changes to the org chart.
- When senior staff are unavailable, make sure the person who is left in charge — and everyone else — understands the scope of his or her authority.

EDITORIAL PLANNING

Very few people knew what Longform stories were assigned and when they were scheduled to be published. It's possible that if more people had read the Holtzclaw story before it went online — or even had known in advance that Stout was planning to publish a story about the football career of a serial rapist — there could have been earlier opportunities for editors to weigh in with questions and concerns.

This lack of transparent editorial planning is not just a Stout or a Longform issue. In fact — despite sporadic use of organizational software such as Trello among individual team members — most editors across the site don't know what long-lead stories are in the works.

This doesn't just pose a problem from a basic organization perspective, it also allows no time for editors to raise concerns about questionable stories or to get more pairs of eyes on their sensitive pieces. A lack of calendar clarity is frequently a byproduct of an organization that has evolved organically. It's up to management (in this case, Lockland and Hall) to take a step back and impose greater order and transparency.

Recommendations:

- Develop a system/procedure for SBNation.com's editorial calendar (particularly of longer-lead stories) to be available to editors.

PRESSURE TO PUBLISH

The short-lead blogging philosophy expressed across Vox Media as “put it on the site” translates poorly to long, reported features or stories on controversial subjects. According to several team members, SBNation.com editors have been working on slowing down the editorial process for longer-lead stories, but the importance of quality over speed when it comes to these pieces does not appear to have fully registered with the editors overseeing the publication of the Holtzclaw story.

The pressure to publish was apparent in Floyd and Bergeron's belief that nothing could be done to kill or hold the Holtzclaw story. At no point in any of our conversations did any editor recall suggesting — or even considering — that publication be halted while the piece's evident issues were resolved. Some editors even mentioned being worried that their concerns might stand in the way of the story going out on time.

In fact, an editor flagging an issue should never be concerned about delaying publication — anyone catching a problem should be heard out and commended for speaking up. While deadlines certainly ought to be adhered to in general, it's rare that a long-lead story like this demands publication at a specific time. Unlike breaking news or stories pegged to specific events, feature stories can often weather a delay of an hour (or a day, a week, or even a month or more) without much of an effect on how they find their readership. No matter how strict the calendar, editorial caution is always an appropriate reason to delay a story or to otherwise deviate from the original plan.

Recommendations:

- Make it clear that editors can hold publication on controversial or sensitive pieces without retribution for being cautious.
- Promote a culture of speaking up about editorial concerns.
- Establish protocol for dealing swiftly and respectfully with editorial concerns about a story.

JOURNALISTIC EXPERIENCE

Some editors at SBNation.com began their journalism careers at SB Nation, as contributors to one of the publication's many team or league blogs, eventually being promoted by league managers and editors up through the ranks to higher-profile positions with editorial oversight and management duties. These promotions rarely, if ever, included specific training in the journalistic responsibilities and considerations of their new roles. As a result, many editors at SBNation.com are experienced at blogging but less confident in the editorial processes of other forms of journalism.

To be clear, formal training — academic training, or on-the-job training in a professional reporting and editing environment — isn't a requirement to be a good journalist. But training and experience do tend to coincide with being well versed in standard newsroom practices that could have helped prevent the Holtzclaw story from happening, including how to deal with sensitive or controversial material and when to delay or spike stories. As SB Nation bloggers move up to become editors, they don't seem to receive enough journalism training and mentorship to meet the demands of their new roles.

Recommendations:

- Establish a training component addressing journalistically responsible approaches to sensitive topics, in-house editorial protocol, and available resources.
- Incorporate general journalistic training/mentorship into the flow of the newsroom, particularly in the case of internal promotions.

3. Diversity and Sensitivity

A diverse staff is essential in a responsible newsroom, and having more women and people of color in senior roles at SB Nation may have prevented a story like this from being published.

Still, even at a homogeneously staffed publication, there's no excuse for something like the Holtzclaw story to ever see the light of day.

BEING A RESPONSIBLE EDITOR

One of an editor's roles is to anticipate how an audience will read a story. Good journalism demands clear words but also clear eyes: An editor should not only know precisely what a writer is trying to say but should anticipate the way his or her words will be read, and it is the editor's job to minimize any difference between the two. These principles have always applied in journalism, but they are of particular immediacy in the digital world. The tides of virality and social media are unpredictable, and can carry a story well beyond the boundaries of its publication or its anticipated readership.

It is a fundamental professional requirement that any editor be able to identify points in a story that a reader might find insulting, misguided, or otherwise generally out of sync with the writer's or publication's intent. In the case of the Holtzclaw story, an unacceptably low number of the editors who read it prior to its publication appeared to understand the true severity of its problems. Editors who fail to understand at the outset why a story like this one ought to be considered sensitive or controversial are failing at a core job skill.

Recommendations:

- Emphasize audience awareness and editorial empathy as an essential skill required of all staff, particularly senior staff. Pieces will often reach a large and eclectic audience, and editors need to consider how different people may interpret them.

DEFERRING SENSITIVITY

SBNation.com had developed an ad hoc procedure for dealing with stories on sensitive topics: In addition to the standard editorial process, editors or writers would informally forward stories to Bergeron or to SBNation.com senior content producer Sarah Kogod, who would read with a close eye for language and angle. In one interview, an editor told us that this was because Bergeron and Kogod "care more, and we know that they care more." This distressingly implies that other senior staff were okay with caring less.

That it is left to the newsroom's two senior-most women, one of whom is of color, to be the people asked to identify issue-related editorial missteps in stories about sexual assault or race or LGBTQ issues is inexplicable and unacceptable. They should not be seen as the gatekeepers of sensitivity.

Inevitably, some editors will be more tuned in than others to the constantly evolving languages and landscapes of conscientious journalism, but it is part of an editor's job to be sensitive to the words and implications of a story. It's flatly unacceptable for any editor to assume that it's not his or her job to care to the fullest extent about matters of ethics, integrity, and accuracy, which is essentially what caring about the construction and phrasing of sensitive stories boils down to.

Recommendations:

- Establish official resources (both people and documentation) for editors and writers working with sensitive issues.
- Require clearly controversial pieces to be read by multiple editors outside the normal workflow for the story type, who are empowered to voice concerns in a collegial environment.

OVERALL NEWSROOM DIVERSITY

According to Vox Media-supplied diversity data, as of March 31, 2016, 89 percent of SB Nation editorial staff self-identify as male, and 87 percent self-identify as white, the highest numbers in both categories across all Vox Media brands. Despite taking some steps toward a more diverse newsroom — including the creation in 2015 of an SB Nation–specific diversity committee, and hosting a summit in Washington, DC for women writers and editors in August 2015 (with a second edition scheduled for August 2016) — editors at SB Nation at all levels, including Hall and Lockland, agree that not enough is happening to diversify the team.

A substantial portion of overall SB Nation editorial is made up of part-time contributors; for SBNation.com’s part in that, recruitment has been admirably inclusive of individuals from all backgrounds. But SB Nation is the oldest of Vox Media’s brands, and consequently is growing the size of its staff at a slower rate than other Vox Media brands. New positions, particularly at the senior level, are rarely created, and staff turnover is minimal. Those factors combined mean that SB Nation has had few opportunities to introduce diverse new perspectives into its newsroom.

Recommendations:

- Working with SBNation.com leadership to determine organizational needs, Vox Media should fund additional headcount for SBNation.com.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Peer Review Group would like to thank everyone who spoke to us for their candor and cooperation. We admire that SB Nation leadership is committed to taking this incident as an opportunity for reflection and improvement. The recommendations and analysis in this report are our group’s attempt to help them — and, in the process, all Vox Media brands — develop better structures and processes.

Although this incident has been painful for the writers and editors of SB Nation, neither the publication of the Holtzclaw story nor its aftermath defines the years of success SB Nation has had since its inception or the great work it will continue to do as it grows into an even stronger network serving its tens of millions of avid fans.