

McVeigh's Attorney Accuses Newspaper of Computer Theft

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DALLAS - Timothy McVeigh's lawyer accused The Dallas Morning News on Monday of breaking into the defense team's computers to steal documents that were used by the newspaper to publish a purported confession by McVeigh to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing

At a news conference in Denver, where McVeigh is set to stand trial for the bombing, attorney Stephen Jones asked for a federal investigation into how the Morning News obtained documents that were the basis for a sensational story last weekend.

A few hours later in Dallas, the Morning News denied its reporter did anything illegal.

"We engaged in lawful newsgathering techniques," said Paul Watler, a lawyer for the newspaper. "We did not violate any laws in putting our story together or gathering information for it."

Saturday's Dallas Morning News cited defense team documents in which McVeigh admitted he had committed the April 1995 bombing and told an unnamed person that he timed the blast for the busy daylight hours to obtain a "body count." One hundred sixty-eight people died, including several children.

McVeigh's lawyer, departing from an earlier claim that the source for the story was a hoax, claimed Monday that the newspaper had obtained hundreds of defense team documents by breaking into his computer.

Watler said the newspaper "met the highest ethical standards" and has nothing to retract. "We have no fear of criminal repercussions."

He told reporters at a press conference in the newspaper's auditorium that Jones' charges were "a very clever tactic on Mr. Jones' part to stir you up against us."

Jones also called on the Texas Supreme Court to investigate whether reporter Pete Slover, who wrote the confession story and who is also a lawyer, should lose his license to practice law.

Asked whether Slover would continue to cover the Oklahoma bombing for the newspaper, Watler called it an editorial decision and said he did not know the answer. But he called Slover "an outstanding reporter of The Dallas Morning News, well thought of here," and said Slover was "important to The Dallas Morning News."

Since the newspaper's story appeared - first on the World Wide Web on Friday, then in Saturday's newspaper - the McVeigh defense team has mounted a number of attacks on it, some of them mutually contradictory. Jones' angriest complaint has been that publication of the story may make it difficult to pick an unbiased jury for the upcoming trial in Denver.

Jones now says he may ask for a 90-day "cooling off period" or delay in the proceedings. He said he will ask to have the trial moved a second time if the Morning News publishes more stories based on defense documents.

In a series of interviews and appearances since the story first appeared on the newspaper's web page last Friday, Editor Ralph Langer has said the story was published because it was clearly an important matter of legitimate public interest and that it would have been wrong for the newspaper to suppress it.

But the newspaper announced in its Monday morning editions that it will not publish any more stories based on the documents and that those papers have been placed into a kind of journalistic escrow in the newspaper's lawyer's safe.

Asked at the press conference Monday if locking up the documents after the first story was published might not look like an about-face, Watler said: "We thought it was appropriate to inform the court and the public that we do not have an intention to make a series out of this. We thought this was a story that needed to be published and had to be published. We published it, and we've said so."

Slover declined Monday to comment on the furor around his story, saying he had been asked to refer all questions to Langer. Slover, 37, who grew up in Houston, has been with the Morning News for eight years. Before that, he was a reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

In 1990 Slover pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor trespassing charge in Waxahachie, where county officials had accused him of breaking into the Ellis County Courthouse. Slover told Morning News editors he had entered innocently through an unlocked public door at the side of the building only to find himself locked inside later. He was investigating a double homicide when the incident occurred.

He was placed on six months' probation, fined \$1,000 and required to perform 150 hours of community service, according to stories published in the Morning News at the time.

Watler said Monday he believed McVeigh's lawyer was acting on his responsibility to his client by trying to cast doubt on the Morning News story about McVeigh. "It's his responsibility to create reasonable doubt in favor of his client," Watler said.

But speculation continued to swirl around the story through the evening Monday. An unidentified source told the ``CBS Nightly News" that the defense had faked the statement as part of an attempt to get a witness to change his story by confronting him with McVeigh's "confession."

That report was similar to information from the McCurtain Daily Gazette of Idabel, Okla., which has broken several stories about the bombing probe. Publisher Bruce Willingham, while denying allegations that one of his reporters passed the defense material to the Morning News, said the defense notes were partly a fabrication used by McVeigh's team to gain information from a source.

"It has long been our understanding," Willingham said, "that the so-called McVeigh confession is a document prepared by a member of the defense team for a specific and limited purpose . . . The contents of that document are a mixture of fact and fantasy purposely and skillfully created so as to allow a member of the McVeigh defense the opportunity to gain access and information from a single source in their complex . . . investigation."

Later, in a statement given to CNBC's ``Rivera Live," McVeigh's defense team said the statement was fabricated not to make the witness change his story but to persuade the witness to talk to them.

McVeigh's lawyers said they believed the witness had a history of incitement to violence and may have been involved in the bombing conspiracy, so, in an attempt to divert his suspicion and get him to talk, they say they concocted a confession from McVeigh and planned to show it to the witness

Caption: Mug: Stephen Jones (color)

Memo: The Associated Press and Washington Post contributed to this story.