

Scandal, Frat Boys, and a Question of Credibility: How the *Rolling Stone* Case Brought

Journalistic Error to Light

On November 19, 2014, a 9,000 word article was published in *Rolling Stone*, an article that would go on to become one of the most-read pieces on the magazine's website. "A Rape on Campus" was the title—jarring, sure, but maybe not especially attention-grabbing for a magazine that had already tackled issues of female reproductive rights, racial tensions, and conflict in the Middle East. The story told of pseudonymous "Jackie", a University of Virginia freshman who had been brutally gang raped by members of the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity in September 2012. Almost immediately after being published, the story was questioned over issues of credibility. In the wake of allegations that Jackie's account was flawed, it was eventually found that not only was her story devoid of credibility, but the author of the piece, Sabrina Rubin Erdely, and *Rolling Stone* had committed several crucial errors in researching and fact-checking the story. Six months and a humiliating retraction later, "A Rape on Campus" went from being just another story to the most polarizing journalism controversy in recent history, signaling a larger issue of credibility in reporting and the legitimacy of witness accounts.

As the story gained traction and its inaccuracies were exposed, many wondered how a professional journalist and one of the most respected magazines in the world could publish such a controversial story without well-conducted research. For one, Ms. Erdely was looking for a collegiate rape case. In a 13,000 word report by the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, commissioned by the magazine to investigate what went wrong in its reporting process, it was found that Ms. Erdely contacted a sexual assault worker at UVA in the hopes of finding a rape case that could epitomize the sexual assault crisis sweeping American colleges and universities.

The UVA employee, Emily Renda, connected Ms. Erdely and Jackie, who told her story in such vivid detail that Ms. Erdely reported being "sicken and shaken" after hearing the brutal details for the first time. It was during this initial interview, the first of seven, during which Ms. Erdely hit her first roadblock — Jackie claimed to have been brought to the Phi Kappa Psi house for a date party with a junior boy, a lifeguard whom she met while working at the campus aquatic center, yet vehemently refused to give his name or any identifying qualities. This refusal continued until *Rolling Stone* editors agreed to continue with the writing of the piece despite not being able to verify the lead attacker's name, record at UVA, or even existence.

In stories like Jackie's that involve sensitive matters, there can be a fine line between fact and fiction, a line that easily becomes blurred as witness accounts are changed, edited, and embellished. For journalists, it can be difficult to remain outside the story. Writers and reporters must be able to sympathize enough so the witness feels comfortable opening up, yet still remain separate from the narrative so the focus can remain on the factual element of the story instead of just the emotional. Ms. Erdely's inability to keep journalistic integrity is perhaps the greatest flaw in an article that the Columbia report labeled "a journalistic failure that was avoidable". At every step of the researching process, Ms. Erdely fell short. As the controversy of the article began to unfold, it was revealed that she made no efforts to find or contact the attacker, Jackie's friends that consoled her the night of the attack, or virtually anyone else mentioned in Jackie's account. The editors and fact-checkers that worked on the story also fell short on ensuring credibility, chalking up the lack of sources to the fragile nature of the piece and Jackie's wish to remain anonymous.

As Jackie's narrative unraveled and was called into question, other investigative reporters,

UVA administration, and the Charlottesville, VA Police Department began to take a closer look into Jackie's alleged gang rape. It was found that there was no Phi Kappa Psi event on the weekend Jackie stated, no student that matched her description or the name she eventually revealed (Haven Monahan), and no clear testimony from the friends she mentioned that a rape had occurred. As a result, the magazine's managing editor at the time, Will Dana, released a statement on December 5, 2014, reading "In the face of new information, there now appear to be discrepancies in Jackie's account, and we have come to the conclusion that our trust in her was misplaced." (Rolling Stone) The statement garnered its own round of backlash for the magazine and author not taking any responsibility, as well as for victim-shaming and putting all blame on the source, a cowardly move that casts negative influence on the already difficult nature of rape allegations. Following Columbia's report that the story lacked any sufficient evidence and the Charlottesville Police Department's final say that they were unable to corroborate Jackie's story following a five month investigation (December to April), *Rolling Stone* retracted "A Rape on Campus" on April 5, 2015.

In the world of journalism, a retraction is the kiss of death, a mark of humiliation that can be difficult to recover from. While *Rolling Stone* did eventually bounce back from the scandal, the fiasco of Jackie's story, its investigation, and its retraction brought to light a larger issue in mainstream media: the issue of credibility. While visual media outlets have experienced their fair share of credibility errors, it is rare that written publications encounter the same fate, seeing as most articles (especially features such as "A Rape on Campus") typically involve hours of researching and fact-checking, as well acceptance only of thoroughly credible sources. While Jackie's story was compelling and certainly could have made for good journalism, only stories

with fact-checked accounts should be considered for such large-scale articles. The case of *Rolling Stone's* reporting failure is unprecedented in modern journalism and signifies a disturbing turn of events where an already-shrinking industry may be turning a blind eye to factual errors in fear of losing a potentially viral story.

Only Jackie knows the specific details of that night in 2012. Whether on her part, the part of the magazine, or a combination of both, her story is not the rallying cry for campus sexual assault prevention that it was intended to be; instead, it has become the go-to example for how not to handle a sensitive topic. Perhaps the fact that no story following has committed such errors speaks to a reinvigorated industry where no publication wants to be the next representation of lazy and inaccurate reporting. It remains to be seen who, if anyone, will be able to get rape reporting right.

Sources:

1. Somaiya, Ravi. "Rolling Stone Article on Rape at University of Virginia Failed All Basics, Report Says." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 05 Apr. 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/business/media/rolling-stone-retracts-article-on-rape-at-university-of-virginia.html?_r=0
2. Mullin, Benjamin. "Rolling Stone Now Faces 3 Lawsuits Stemming from 'A Rape On Campus'" *Poynter*. The Washington Post, 09 Nov. 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
<http://www.poynter.org/2015/rolling-stone-now-faces-2-lawsuits-stemming-from-a-rape-on-campus/383719/>
3. "'Brutal' Report Cites Multiple Failures in Rolling Stone Rape Article." *The Chicago Tribune*. The Chicago Tribune, 6 Apr. 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-rolling-stone-rape-story-review-20150405-story.html>
4. Coronel, Sheila, Steve Coll, and Derek Kravitz. "Rolling Stone and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report." *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, 05 Apr. 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
<http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-what-went-wrong-20150405>
5. Strupp, Joe. "How The Rolling Stone Rape Story Failure Has -- And Hasn't -- Changed Media Coverage." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 06 July 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
<http://mediamatters.org/blog/2015/07/07/how-the-rolling-stone-rape-story-failure-has-an/204263>
6. Hartmann, Margaret. "Everything We Know About the UVA Rape Case [Updated]." *New*

York Magazine. New York Magazine, 30 July 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.

<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/12/everything-we-know-uva-rape-case.html>

7. Westerholm, Russell. "'A Rape on Campus': Judge Rules 'Jackie' Must Turn Over Documents Pertaining to Rolling Stone Story." *University Herald*. University Herald, 15 Jan. 2016. Web. 1 May 2016.

<http://www.universityherald.com/articles/27831/20160115/a-rape-on-campus-judge-rules-jackie-must-turn-over-documents-pertaining-to-rolling-stone-story.htm>