

A Case For Rape – Part A

(This case was prepared by University of Georgia journalism student Khadija Dukes for JOUR 5170, Advanced Studies in Journalism, based on secondary sources cited below.)

On November 19, 2014, *Rolling Stone* published an investigative piece about a University of Virginia student who was raped by seven men at a fraternity party her freshman year. To get the story, Sabrina Rubin Erdely interviewed “Jackie,” the alleged rape victim, but failed to interview those accused of raping her as a promise to Jackie, who feared retaliation. Her friends who saw her immediately after the incident also were not interviewed. Erdely and the *Rolling Stone* editors and fact-checkers saw no reason to question Jackie’s credibility and they claim that they did reach out to the local and national branches of Phi Kappa Psi for comment.

Discussion:

At first glance, does anything appear unethical about this investigation to you?

Do you find it problematic that Erdely did not reach out to the accused fraternity members?

Do you think Erdely’s promise to Jackie affects her credibility?

Is it an act of journalistic courage to avoid talking to the accused in order to protect a rape victim from possible retaliation?

A Case For Rape – Part B

Following the accusations, Teresa Sullivan, the University of Virginia's president, suspended all Greek organizations until January 9. Sullivan also asked the Charlottesville Police Department to start an investigation into Jackie's rape. Phi Kappa Psi's national leadership then proceeded to suspend the activities of the University of Virginia's Phi Kappa Psi chapter. Prior to the *Rolling Stone* article, student victims were given the option of whether or not to contact police after a sexual assault, according to University of Virginia policy. Since the incident, the university has changed to a zero-tolerance policy regarding sexual assault.

Erdely, when asked about her reporting on this incident, mentions that she heard about Jackie's story through the leader of a University of Virginia sexual assault group, Emily Renda. After hearing her story, Erdely claims she spent weeks corroborating Jackie's account of events. In her account, Jackie states that her friends convinced her to not report the rape, and under the former university policy she would not be forced to contact police.

Discussion:

Should Erdely have questioned Renda's credibility?

If the university had instated a zero-tolerance policy prior to this event occurring would it have made a difference?

What could Erdely have done to further corroborate Jackie's story?

A Case For Rape – Part C

In the aftermath of the *Rolling Stone* article, *Worth* magazine's editor-in-chief, Richard Bradley, was one of the first mainstream journalists to question the *Rolling Stone* article. Bradley was the former editor of *George* magazine where he worked alongside Stephen Glass, who is known to have fabricated many of his stories. In a blog post, Bradley commented on the credibility of the article, stating that he learned a valuable lesson from the Stephen Glass incident and that "one must be most critical" of stories of this nature. Aside from the fact that the true identity of Jackie is not revealed in the article and that the accused rapists were not interviewed, Bradley also noted that this story plays into "existing biases." "Let me be very clear: I don't doubt that it's possible that this happened," he wrote in his blog post. "But more than that: I don't believe that it happened—certainly not in the way that it is recounted."

Following his controversial blog post, other news outlets began to question the *Rolling Stone* article. The *Washington Post* interviewed the three friends who saw Jackie after the incident. Their accounts diverge from what was reported in the *Rolling Stone* article and led other major news outlets to also question the article.

Discussion:

Do you think Bradley should have made the blog post?

Do you think Bradley's post raised issues of credibility that could negatively impact *Rolling Stone*?

Can being "most critical" of a rape victim's story lead to victim-blaming, thus discouraging victims to come forward?

A Case For Rape – Conclusion

Following the new information reported by the *Washington Post*, *Rolling Stone* posted a statement saying that "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." This statement was later revised to hold *Rolling Stone* accountable for its own actions rather than Jackie.

The University of Virginia reinstated their chapter of Phi Kappa Psi following the police investigation's conclusion that the incident did not occur at the fraternity. *Rolling Stone* editor and publisher, Jann Wenner has asked the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism to conduct an independent investigation regarding the alleged rape.

Discussion:

Who should be held accountable in this situation?

Should *Rolling Stone* have done the story? What's the justification for your answer?

What discrepancies in reporting might Columbia University find? What principles of the journalistic code of ethics were not adhered to?

Sources:

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