Mistakes, Misinformation and Lies?

■ Editorial Cartoon: Tom Toles | “I can still see the body floating by my window ...”
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■ Editorial Cartoon: Tom Toles | “Moss”
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■ Student Activity: Lessons in Journalistic Ethics
Sometimes reporters are given information that is wrong. Eyewitnesses think they are telling the truth, but they had a limited perspective or want to contribute something so much they mislead themselves. They may report seeing what they wanted to see; for example, they report seeing a teacher berating a student when he was, in fact, giving the youth directions.

Media must check the facts, for their readers’ benefit, their own sake and for the sake of their sources. Credibility is essential to media’s relation with readers and viewers. We examine what can be learned from two recent media failures at NBC News and *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Although media ethics suggests that media cover the news, not be the news, Tom Toles puts a spotlight on foreign correspondent Jason Rezaian, *The Post*’s Tehran bureau chief who has been imprisoned since July 22, 2014.
1. Brian Williams became anchor of NBC Nightly News on December 2, 2004. What is the role of the broadcast anchor?

2. What are the definitions of “mistake,” “misinformation,” “fabrication” and “lie”?

3. On January 30, 2015, Williams broadcast a special segment to honor a retired military officer. In it he told of how in 2003 in Iraq he had been onboard the same Chinook helicopter that was hit by RPG fire. A flight engineer and other crew members who were forced to make an emergency landing of three helicopters that were attacked said the helicopter that carried Williams did not land until 30-60 minutes after the attack. What would you do with this conflicting information?
4. Tom Toles is *The Washington Post*’s editorial cartoonist. In this role he makes visual commentary on current events, issues and concerns that deserve dialogue. Rather than focus on the helicopter claim, Toles refers to Williams’ report that during Hurricane Katrina coverage in 2005 he had looked from his 8th floor room and seen a dead body float by the Ritz on Canal Street. Why do you think Toles chose to draw this event?

5. Look at the details in the cartoon. What is the setting?

6. Toles labels the figure “Williams.” When a cartoonist labels items, he wants to be sure there is no misunderstanding of his subject. Why is Williams in shallow water? Perhaps treading water?

7. From the words in the balloon and microphone, we infer that Williams is reporting. To understand the dimensions of Toles’ commentary, focus on the words “still” and “my.” Why are they commentaries on Williams’ actions after his February 4 on-air apology for his “mistake in recalling the events of 12 years ago”?

8. In the lower right corner, Toles’ alter ego makes additional commentary. He often uses puns, word play, satire and references to literature. To what does “You’ve met the enemy!” refer?

9. Taken all the details together, what is Tom Toles’ point of view on Brian Williams’ words and actions?

10. Do you agree or disagree with Toles’ perspective?
Mistakes, Misinformation, Lies
Case Study 2015, Brian Williams

Brian Williams, the highly respected and well-paid NBC News anchor had said in a tribute to a retired soldier that he had been under fire in a helicopter in Iraq in 2003, along with this brave soldier and others. When the Stars and Stripes newspaper contacted members of the Chinook helicopter crew, after reading tweets and comments of complaint about the story, they said Williams was not aboard and had arrived on another helicopter that landed 30-60 minutes after the crippled Chinook had landed.

When interviewed Williams told Stars and Stripes, “I would not have chosen to make this mistake. I don’t know what screwed up in my mind that caused me to conflate one aircraft with another.”

The story did not go away. Williams is well liked, but he is still held to the same code of ethics as other journalists. On February 4, Williams made a live 50-second statement on the “NBC Nightly News”:

After a groundfire incident in the desert during the Iraq war invasion, I made a mistake in recalling the events of 12 years ago. It did not take long to hear from some brave men and women in the air crews who were also in that desert. I want to apologize. I said I was traveling in an aircraft that was hit by [rocket-propelled grenade] fire. I was instead in a following aircraft. We all landed after the groundfire incident. And spent two harrowing nights in a sand storm in the Iraq desert. This was a bungled attempt by me to thank one special veteran and, by extension, our brave military men and women, veterans everywhere, those who have served while I did not. I hope they know they have my greatest respect and also now my apology.

After reading this summary of the incident and Williams’ statement, explain how the following concepts apply to NBC News officials’ decision to suspend Williams for six months.

- Accuracy
- Understandable lapse in memory
- Credibility
- Misinformation
- Truthfulness
- Misleading the public
- Code of Ethics
- Lies
- Spin

What is good about being able to comment on or post replies to news stories online? What challenges do these interactions create for journalists? For webmasters?
Tom Toles  | April 8, 2015

1. Magazines have different audiences and areas of coverage. What segment of culture does Rolling Stone magazine cover? Who composes its audience?

2. Publications promote their main stories on the cover. To which cover story does Toles’ refer?

3. When editorial cartoonists label details, they are making sure readers understand the event, issue or action on which they are commenting. Explain the two allusions on the sullied cover.

4. To what does “Moss” refer?

5. An editorial cartoon presents visual commentary. What is the subject of this cartoon? What is Tom Toles’ point of view on this topic?
The writer of a blockbuster *Rolling Stone* magazine story about an alleged gang rape at a University of Virginia fraternity has said that she was unable to contact or interview the men who supposedly perpetrated the crime.

In interviews with *The Washington Post* and *Slate.com* last week, writer Sabrina Rubin Erdely declined to answer repeated questions about the men’s response to an allegation by a female student named Jackie that they had sexually assaulted her at a U-Va. fraternity party in 2012.

However, in a podcast interview with *Slate*, Erdely indicated that she was unable to locate the fraternity brothers in the course of her reporting to get their side of the story.

“I reached out to [the accused] in multiple ways,” Erdely said in the *Slate* interview. “They were kind of hard to get in touch with because [the fraternity’s] contact page was pretty outdated. But I wound up speaking … I wound up getting in touch with their local president, who sent me an e-mail, and then I talked with their sort of, their national guy, who’s kind of their national crisis manager. They were both helpful in their own way, I guess.”

Sean Woods, who edited the *Rolling Stone* story, said in an interview that Erdely did not talk to the alleged assailants. “We did not talk to them. We could not reach them,” he said in an interview.

However, he said, “we verified their existence,” in part by talking to Jackie’s friends. “I’m satisfied that these guys exist and are real. We knew who they were.”

News organizations typically seek comment from those accused of criminal acts or from their attorneys as a matter of fairness and balance, as well as to confirm that the individuals exist.

Erdely’s Nov. 19 article, which touched off a criminal investigation and an outraged reaction among the school’s students, faculty and alumni, included no such response and gave no indication that she had met or seen the men, who Jackie said were still on campus.

The nine men who Jackie said participated in the gang rape were not identified by name in the *Rolling Stone* story. But the article contained clues to their identities, including their affiliation with the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity at U-Va. and their attendance at a party at the frat in September 2012. “Drew,” the frat brother who allegedly lured Jackie to the darkened room at the fraternity in which the assault took place, was described in the most detail in the article. Erdely said that he was an attractive U-Va. junior and a lifeguard at a university pool.

No one has been arrested for the alleged crime. The university has turned the matter over to the Charlottesville police, who have launched an investigation.

Erdely declined to address specific questions about her reporting when contacted on Sunday and Monday.

“I could address many of [the questions] individually . . . but by dwelling on this, you’re getting sidetracked,” she wrote in an e-mail response to *The Post*’s inquiry. “As I’ve already told you, the gang-rape scene that leads the story is the alarming account that Jackie — a person whom I found to be credible — told to me, told her friends, and importantly, what she told the UVA administration, which chose not to act on her allegations in any way — i.e., the overarching point of the article. THAT is the story: the culture that greeted her and so many other UVA women I interviewed, who came forward with allegations, only to be met with indifference.”

She added, “I think I did my due diligence in reporting this story; RS’s
excellent editors, fact-checkers, and lawyers all agreed.”

Woods said that the men were not named in the story because “we were telling Jackie’s story. It’s her story.”

In her article, Erdely quoted the fraternity’s chapter president and a spokesman for Phi Kappa Psi’s national chapter. Both expressed shock at the allegations when informed of them by university administrators but said that they had no direct knowledge of them and were seeking to substantiate them.

There have been no arrests in the case, and no alleged assailants have been publicly identified.

In her interview with The Post, Erdely said that she “corroborated every aspect of the story that I could.” She said that she did not identify any of the alleged attackers in the article “by Jackie’s request. She asked me not to name the individuals because she’s so fearful of them. That was something we agreed on. She was nervous about naming the frat, too. I told her, ‘If we’re trying to shine a light on this, we have to name the fraternity.’”

Erdely declined to say whether she knows the names of the alleged perpetrators, including “Drew.” “I can’t answer that,” she said. “This was a topic that made Jackie extremely uncomfortable.”
A failure to follow tenets of reporting

With U-Va. Rape story Rolling Stone ignored some basic rules of journalism

BY PAUL FARHI
News Analysis

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Journalists are paid to be skeptical and to distinguish facts from assertions: Don’t get too close to your sources and check what they tell you.

Rolling Stone magazine, it appears, ignored both principles in its explosive story, “A Rape on Campus.”

The 9,000-word article about Jackie, a University of Virginia freshman who alleged a frat-house gang rape, was apparently fraught from the beginning with gaps in basic reporting. The story’s writer, Sabrina Rubin Erdely, as well as a phalanx of editors, fact-checkers and lawyers who massaged the piece before publication, accepted Jackie’s account without locking down key details that would have confirmed, or at least plausibly substantiated, her harrowing tale.

Instead, Erdely’s story, published Nov. 19 to a thunderous and mostly positive reaction, appears to have been fatally defective. Major details, including the name of the fraternity in question, are in dispute or have been exposed as false. Jackie’s allies have distanced themselves from her and from Rolling Stone’s story.

And so, too, has Rolling Stone. The magazine backed away from the story Friday and placed the onus for its defects on Jackie. “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,” wrote managing editor Will Dana in “A Note to Our Readers” posted on the magazine’s Web site. (The magazine did not return calls for further comment.)

He also wrote, ”Because of the sensitive nature of Jackie’s story, we decided to honor her request not to contact the man she claimed orchestrated the attack on her nor any of the men she claimed participated in the attack for fear of retaliation against her.”

Which, like the story itself, is not entirely accurate.

In interviews with The Washington Post and Slate, Erdely never asserted that she had agreed not to speak to the men in question — only that she wouldn’t name them in her story or talk about them afterward. Jackie “asked me not to name the individuals because she’s so fearful of them,” she told The Post. “That was something we agreed to. She was nervous to name the fraternity, too. I told her, ‘If we’re trying to shine light on this, we have to name the fraternity.’ ”

In fact, Erdely and her editor, Sean Woods, later acknowledged that the magazine had tried to find the men but failed to do so. “We did not talk to them,” Woods said. “We could not reach them.”

That should have been a red flag. In essence, neither writer nor editor could warrant that the men alleged to have committed a terrible crime actually existed.

That’s not to say that Rolling Stone should have abandoned the story altogether. But it does suggest the need for more reporting before going to press. The failure to ascertain the whereabouts of key actors in such a revolting drama left Rolling Stone not with she said/he said ambiguity — a feature of every alleged crime or scandal — but with half a story, told from a single viewpoint. Except for two vague, inconclusive quasi-denials by the president of the local Phi Kappa Psi chapter and the executive director of the fraternity, no aspect of Jackie’s story was rebutted.

Indeed, wrote Dana, “In the months Erdely spent reporting the story, Jackie neither said nor did anything that made Erdely, or Rolling Stone’s editors and fact-checkers, question...
Jackie’s credibility. Her friends and rape activists on campus strongly supported Jackie’s account.” But “friends” and “activists” have little incentive to be skeptical; that’s the reporter’s job.

To be sure, *Rolling Stone* was under no obligation to prove that Jackie’s account was true. That is a standard that eludes even the most rigorous trials, with eyewitness testimony and expert witnesses. News organizations, however, are responsible for independently verifying details, ascertaining facts, rooting out discrepancies and determining whether the discrepancies it finds are substantial enough to discredit a story.

How, for example, could Jackie recognize some of the men she said assaulted her in a room Erdely described as “pitch black”? How could she have exited the fraternity house via an entrance that, upon inspection, would have been shown not to exist? Did a party really take place at the fraternity on Sept. 28, 2012? (The fraternity maintains it did not.) If so, what did some of the partygoers, if not the alleged rapists, remember about that night? No such recollections were cited, leaving readers to wonder whether anyone was asked in the first place.

Erdely also adopted the “voice” of her protagonist as she described the alleged events. The style is common in magazine writing; newspapers are wary of it, lest it give too much credence to one perspective rather than multiple viewpoints. “You can have voice if the underlying facts check out,” said Emily Bell, professor of professional practice at Columbia University’s School of Journalism. “But you have to have the facts. [This] was a factual failing, not a presentational one. Voice is a secondary issue.”

Erdely herself deflected questions about her contacts with “Drew” — the purported ringleader of the gang rape — she demurred, citing her non-disclosure agreement with Jackie. Her answer left the impression that she had indeed had such contact with Drew, but was bound not to talk about it.

The magazine could also have disclosed to its readers what it did not know and what its reporting could not show. The story didn’t disclose, for example, that Erdely couldn’t find Drew, nor a second fraternity member who Jackie identified.

Such caveats may weaken the overall narrative, but they help readers understand how strong the narrative is in the first place.

There’s another basic principle in journalism: Every story has two sides. In fact, every story has many sides. *Rolling Stone* decided to run with just one of them. To its everlasting regret.
1. Tom Toles is calling reader attention to one man’s story. Who is “Rezaian”?

2. Where is the cartoon set? State three details that establish the setting of the cartoon.

3. Who is the second figure in the cartoon and what is he doing in the second panel?

4. What is a “centrifuge”? What do you think Toles’ alter ego in the lower right corner means?

5. Editorial cartoons use few words. What is the particular importance of these words: “reporter,” “defense,” “here,” “serious” and “crime”?

6. Editorial cartoons shed light on issues, comment on actions and engender dialogue. What can readers do in this situation?
Lessons in Journalistic Ethics

Blunders, excessive use of stringers, plagiarism and fabricated stories have caused reporters to lose their jobs. In American journalism these include the high profile cases of Janet Cooke, Jason Blair and Stephen Glass. Cooke created an eight-year-old heroin addict, Blair plagiarized and fabricated information, and Glass had 27 violations of *The New Republic*’s ethics code, primarily for fabricating information. These talented young reporters put the credibility of their publications into jeopardy and ruined their careers.

- **Blunders:**
  - Cooke created an eight-year-old heroin addict.
  - Blair plagiarized and fabricated information.
  - Glass had 27 violations of *The New Republic*’s ethics code.

- **Excessive Use of Stringers:**
  - Cooke's story about a new type of heroin.

- **Plagiarism and Fabricated Stories:**
  - Cooke’s story about a new type of heroin.
  - Blair’s story about a new type of heroin.
  - Glass’s story about a new type of heroin.

- **Impact:**
  - Cooke’s story led to her Pulitzer Prize being withdrawn.
  - Blair’s story led to his dismissal from *The New York Times*.
  - Glass’s story led to his dismissal from *The New Republic*.

- **Lessons:**
  - The importance of honesty and integrity in journalism.
  - The need for strong editorial supervision.

- **Thought Questions:**
  - What qualities did these reporters share?
  - Why did they choose unethical paths?
  - What lessons can we learn from their stories?

**JANET COOKE**
Janet Cooke was a gifted writer with ambition. When she was sent by a *Washington Post* editor to learn more about a reported new type of heroin, Cooke returned with notes and assurance that there was a story. Her “Jimmy’s World” series won the 1981 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing. *The Post*’s embarrassment became a prime example of the need for journalism ethics and strong editorial supervision. Read “Post Reporter’s Pulitzer Prize Is Withdrawn; Pulitzer Board Withdraws Post Reporter’s Prize” and the public disclosure written by Bill Green, *The Washington Post* ombudsman at the time.

**JASON BLAIR**
Jason Blair, a young and promising *New York Times* reporter, pretended to be at locations while he remained in New York. Read how a story in a small Texas town exposed Jason Blair to be a plagiarist and falsifier. *The Times* investigated all his stories; by the end Blair, *The Time*’s executive editor and managing editor had all lost their jobs. Could the newspaper's credibility be repaired?

**STEPHEN GLASS**
Stephen Glass, 25, was a feature writer contributing to many magazines and associate editor of *The New Republic*. His story, “Hack Heaven,” proved to be his demise. "Shattered Glass," a *Vanity Fair* article, and the movie of the same name detail the story of his fabrication.