*ROLLING STONE* & THE BOSTON BOMBER: SAVVY MARKETING, SOCIAL IRRESPONSIBILITY OR BOTH?

The August 1st issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine included an in-depth article on one of the two alleged Boston Marathon bombers, Dzhokhar (Jahar) Tsarnaev. What sent the social media world into frenzy on July 17th was Tsarnaev’s picture on the magazine’s cover, which was released July 16th on its Facebook page. The magazine reached newsstands on Friday, July 19th. The following “heading” was to the lower right of Jahar’s face: “The Bomber: How a Popular, Promising Student Was Failed by His Family, Fell Into Radical Islam and Became a Monster” (Reitman, 2013; see Figure 1).

“[C]ommenters took to social media to question whether Tsarnaev’s cover was glamorizing terrorism” (Gabbatt, 2013; Sneed, 2013). There were more than 16,000 postings on the magazine’s Facebook page by that evening (Cannold, et al., 2013). “Sultry eyes burn into the camera lens from behind tousled curls. A scruff of sexy beard and loose T-shirt are bathed in soft, yellow light. The close-up of [Jahar] . . . looks more like a young Bob Dylan” (“Rock star,” 2013) than the young man accused of the April 15th bombing. Mass umbrage occurred over the thought that “the magazine was conferring iconic status on a man who has been charged with a brutal act of terrorism” (Carr, 2013; three died and more than 260 were injured (Ray, 2013; Reitman, 2013)). For example, “’Oh look, Rolling Stone magazine is glamourizing terrorism. Awesome,’ Adrienne Graham commented on the magazine's Facebook page. ‘I will NOT be buying this issue, or any future issues.’ Others expressed similar sentiments, and words such as "tasteless," "sickening" and "disgusting" flew around social media” (Cannold, et al., 2013). "’I am ending my subscription. This is bullshit. Let's honor those who hurt innocent people. Who's next, George Zimmerman?? Rolling Stone is a music magazine, not the Taliban Times,’ wrote another Facebook user” (Gabbatt, 2013).

Politicians including Arizona Senator John McCain, Boston Mayor Tom Menino and Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick condemned the magazine for purposefully creating controversial publicity for the sake of sales (Carr, 2013; Forbes, 2013; Henneberger, 2013; “Rock star,” 2013).

Defenders of the magazine questioned the retailers’ censorship activities, calling to mind images of Nazi book burnings decades ago (Johnson, 2013). *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* editors said, “A consumer’s individual choice is one thing, but withholding a magazine from sale because a legitimate news subject is on the cover underestimates America’s resilience in the face of terror” (“News phobia,” 2013). *Boston Globe* editors cautioned, “’This issue of Rolling Stone should be judged not by its cover, but on the information that it brings to the public record’” (Johnson,

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2013). “Slate’s Max Linsky concurs, writing that ‘lost amid the uproar over the cover was … an incredible piece of reporting by [Reitman] that helps explain how a charming kid from Cambridge became a monster’” (Forbes, 2013).

Should *Rolling Stone* have put Jahar on its August 1st cover? Why or why not? Is the criticism justified? Why or why not? Is the magazine being a news journal with serious reporting on the news, or is it primarily a journal featuring the entertainment industry? Did the magazine practice good marketing or act in a socially irresponsible manner? Support your viewpoint. Did the attention of the social media community help or hurt the sales of the magazine? What about future issues and the potential long term reputation of *Rolling Stone*?

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Figure 1: Rolling Stone Cover

Source: <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/jahars-world-20130717>

