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

Teaching Note

Critical Incident Overview

The August 1st cover of *Rolling Stone*, released July 17th on its Facebook™ page, created a social media uprising because it featured alleged Boston Marathon bomber, Dzhokhar (Jahar) Tsarnaev. The uproar that spread across the Internet also made it into traditional media, and generated both critics and defenders of the magazine. Students are then asked to discuss the ethics of the magazine’s decision as well as the ethics of the actions of critics. The focus of this incident is on the journalistic ethics and marketing practices of the magazine.

This incident is appropriate for Principles of Marketing (social media or promotion chapters), Integrated Marketing Communications, Social Media Marketing, and Journalism classes. It could also be used in Business Ethics classes after ethical philosophies have been covered.

Research Methods

This critical incident is based on secondary research, primarily online magazines and newspapers. No information in the incident is disguised.

Learning Objectives

1. Students should evaluate the decision made by the magazine editor in terms of journalistic ethics.
2. Students should evaluate the decision made by the magazine editor in terms of good marketing practice.
3. Students should be able to defend their positions regarding the cover decision; i.e., would they have chosen Tsarnaev for the cover or not and why.

Questions:

1. Should *Rolling Stone* have put Jahar on its August 1st cover? Why or why not? Did the magazine practice good marketing or act in a socially irresponsible manner? Support your viewpoint.
2. Was the criticism justified? Why or why not?
3. Decide if the magazine was being a news journal with serious reporting on the news, or was it primarily a journal featuring the entertainment industry?
4. If you were the editor of *Rolling Stone*, would you have put Jahar on the cover? Why or why not? [What’s your decision and why?]
5. Assess the impact of the social media community’s reaction on the sales of the magazine?
6. Assess the impact on future issues and the potential long term reputation of *Rolling Stone*?

Answers

1. Should *Rolling Stone* have put Jahar on its August 1st cover? Why or why not? Did the magazine practice good marketing or act in a socially irresponsible manner? Support your viewpoint.

Students will vary in terms of their opinions. In MKTG 444 (IMC) on 8/29/13, most students tended to disagree with the magazine’s decision to put Jahar on its cover. Comments included “made him a martyr,” “poor marketing strategy,” and concern that the magazine was glamorizing a terrorist. Some were okay with it. In MKTG 605 (Principles) on 4/10/14, one student commented that he would not have put Tsarnaev’s picture on the cover; however, he also said that if it is the main story in the issue, one must put the picture on the cover. A female graduate student from China commented that a terrorist’s face is covered to protect his/her privacy.

1. Was the criticism justified? Why or why not?

Students’ opinions will vary. The 444 students who were okay with the cover thought social media users were too quick to complain about the cover. One said sending the cover picture was “stupid.” One 605 student commented that showing him as a normal guy emphasizes that this [turning into a terrorist] could happen. Another grad student said that it would help to have read the article before judging the cover. Another grad student criticized social media participants, noting that they were actually doing the opposite of what they intended. By spreading his cover photo around in their outrage, they were actually advertising it. Also, there is too much lying and blame-tossing in social media. Instructors are encouraged to share this quote from Henneberger (2013): “But if publishing the photo was so outrageous, why was it OK for critics to share it all over social media?” We question the ethics of the social media critics on this matter.

1. Was the magazine being a news journal with serious reporting on the news, or was it primarily a journal featuring the entertainment industry?

The authors of the incident disagree on this question. One believes the magazine did a very good job of journalism and found the article to be well written, informative, balanced, and not at all glamorizing. The other believes the magazine has had the reputation of being focused on the entertainment industry. After all, the 1972 song by Dr. Hook & The Medicine Show mentioned getting “your picture on the cover of the Rolling Stone” (Henneberger, 2013).

Several commentators have supported the magazine in terms of following journalistic ethics. Jeff Seglin, a public policy lecturer, “feels the cover photo *is* journalistically defensible … if, that is, the magazine’s editors at least grappled with the ethics of how using that photo might upset bombing victims and their survivors” (Henneberger, 2013). Carr (2013) observed, “The story and cover treatment of Mr. Tsarnaev was clinically an act of journalism.” Doug Spero, a mass communications professor, stated, “’I am a guy of journalistic ethics, and from what I am reading here, this looks like solid journalism’” (Goodale, 2013, July 17th).

However, others disagreed. Brian Heffron, a public relations professional, stated, “’The magazine seems to be romanticizing him as a James Dean rebel and not profiling a mass murderer’” (Goodale, 2013, July 17th). Journalism professor Carolyn Kitch expressed more concern with the headline, that “it suggests a tragic fall” (Goodale, 2013, July 17th).

The Society of Professional Journalists adheres to a code of ethics that has four key standards:

* Seek Truth and Report It
* Minimize Harm
* Act Independently
* Be Accountable.

The full code of ethics can be found at <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>; professors may want to print this out and give to their students to aid in the discussion of this question.

Regarding the article, in terms of “Never distort the content of news photos or video,” *Rolling Stone* used an actual photograph (a “selfie”) taken by Tsarnaev himself on its cover. The magazine certainly followed this tenet of the first bulleted point above: “Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.” Janet Reitman, in researching and preparing her article, followed these “Minimize harm” tenets: “Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief” and “Balance a criminal suspect’s fair trial rights with the public’s right to be informed.” Finally, the magazine certainly followed this tenet: “Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct” (SPJ.com, 2014).

1. If you were the editor of *Rolling Stone*, would you have put Jahar on the cover? Why or why not?

Student answers will vary. The authors disagree on this. One would have put it on the cover while the other would not have done so. Dr. Carole Lieberman, a psychiatrist, thinks the cover decision is dangerous. “’This will provoke wannabe terrorists to commit similar acts, so that their picture will be on the cover, as well” (Goodale, 2013, July 17th). Mr. Heffron said, “’the editors knew full well the controversy will grab attention’ from its target demographic” (Goodale, 2013, July 17th). Advertising professional George Lois said he “would have refused to use the Tsarnaev picture at all” because the magazine bestows some sort of cultural icon status to the person whose face is on its cover (Forbes, 2013).

Professor Tatge commented, “’To the extent that this story gives us more information about this horrible tragedy, it is valuable’” (Goodale, 2013, July 17th). Carr (2013) said, “There is civic and journalistic value in finding out more about who this person is, and if the cover created in-bound interest, that would seem to be to the good.” A Boston Globe editorial stated, “’This issue of Rolling Stone should be judged not by its cover, but on the information that it brings to the public record’” (Johnson, 2013). “Washington Post media critic Erik Wemple said Rolling Stone should be out defending its article, because it's ‘a pretty easy thing to defend.’ ‘What you have here is a story about a guy who was very integrated and well-balanced, by all accounts, member of our society until something happened,’ Wemple said. ‘We don't know precisely what happened and that was the whole point of this Rolling Stone story -- to account for how he slid off the rails’ (Cannold, et al., 2013).

1. Assess the impact of the social media community’s reaction on the sales of the magazine?

One 444 student said people on social media should have read the article but boycotted the magazine. “Though widely denounced …, Rolling Stone nonetheless comes out a winner – with sales of that particular issue soaring” (Goodale, 2013, August 1st). According to Sneed (2013) and Saul (2013), the magazine’s sales of that issue rose by 102%. “’Media boycotts most often play into the hands of those who are being targeted,’ says Ben Bogardus [a journalism professor]” (Goodale, 2013, August 1st). Carr (2013) noted that “[e]ditorially, the cover was a win.” However, though sales were up, some advertisers were not happy about not getting any advance warning (Goodale, 2013, August 1st).

1. Assess the impact on future issues and the potential long term reputation of *Rolling Stone*?

This question was added after the 444 class had discussed an earlier version of the incident. One author had never really paid attention to or read the magazine before. While we were revising the incident and preparing this teaching note, the magazine came out with a story of former New England Patriots’ wide receiver Aaron Hernandez, who stands accused of murder (Solotaroff, 2013). Hernandez’ picture was on the cover. Do a search on Google to see all the discussion generated by this article. Is this sensationalism instead of journalism? Could be, one author must admit. A pop culture professor, Robert Thompson, opined “’When [the story] first broke, I had a 25-year-old student ask me if Rolling Stone was still being published’ … ‘I guarantee that he is not asking that question any more’” (Goodale, 2013, August 1st).

General discussion

Other items and comments of note:

* After discussion of the incident, the instructor may want to throw out the following “tidbits” to see if the students would have changed their answers:
  + Janet Reitman (2013), the author of the article on Jahar, has received mobile phone calls from strangers 24 hours a day wishing her death. She wrote on her Facebook page that she was surprised and scared by people’s reactions (Henneberger, 2013).
  + The controversial cover photo was actually the one posted by Jahar himself on his Facebook page. It was also used on the front page of *The New York Times* on May 5th (Wines, 2013). “It was a self-shot photo, or ‘selfie’ …That photo is the way he wanted the world to see him” (Carr, 2013).
  + How do your students react to the sales increase as a result?
* From Forbes (2013): Professor Thompson said, “’That cover made him look human, like us, and that makes people nervous,’ … ‘If they had used the police mug shot, there would be no issue.’”
* Johnson (2013) said, “Americans need that picture and story. Because Jahar is what bombers look like. Neither Middle East wars abroad nor NSA spying at home can save us. What perhaps could help is trying to understand American citizens like Jahar in Boston and McVeigh in Oklahoma City.”
* Carr (2013) concludes, “Just as you can’t judge a book (or a magazine) by its cover, the kid behind that confident selfie was, it seems, a big, hot mess.”
* “S.E. Cupp, who will co-host CNN's new "Crossfire" program, [tweeted](https://twitter.com/secupp), ‘To me, seems @RollingStone isn't glamorizing terrorism, but proving that it can look innocent and young and attractive. Important lesson’ (Cannold, et al., 2013).

Secondary Uses of the Critical Incident

Professors may want to focus on the actions of retailers and a Massachusetts state police photographer. Incident information is provided below, followed by additional questions and answers that pertain to this secondary focus.

Boston/New England area retailers announced boycotts of the magazine, refusing to put the issue on their shelves. National retailers participating in the boycott included CVS, Walgreens, Rite Aid, 7-Eleven and Kmart (Forbes, 2013; “Rock star,” 2013). For example, “Within hours, CVS announced that it would not sell the issue in its store. ‘As a company with deep roots in New England and a strong presence in [Boston](http://www.theguardian.com/world/boston), we believe this is the right decision out of respect for the victims of the attack and their loved ones,’ it said” (Gabbatt, 2013). Meanwhile, Sargeant Sean Murphy, a Massachusetts state police photographer, leaked photos of a bloody Jahar at the point of capture to *Boston* magazine in “retaliation” for the cover. He is now in trouble and may lose his job (Forbes, 2013; Planas, 2013).

Questions:

1. Should Sargeant Murphy have leaked the crime scene photo? Why or why not?
2. Is it appropriate for retailers to censure the magazine? Why or why not?

Answers:

1. Should Sargeant Murphy have leaked the crime scene photo? Why or why not?

The 444 students really didn’t say much about this. One did say s/he “would rather see him ‘beat up’ than ‘glammed up.’” The authors understand his anger and frustration but do not think he was justified in releasing the photos. Murphy was suspended shortly after the release and may lose his job. There has been some social media movement in support of what he did (Forbes, 2013; Planas, 2013). Then there is this possible unintended consequence: “Legal experts have speculated it [releasing those photos] could jeopardize the government’s case against Tsarnaev” (Planas, 2013).

1. Is it appropriate for retailers to censure the magazine? Why or why not?

Most of the 444 students thought the retail censorship was appropriate in Boston as well as across the USA. One said, “Where does it stop?” Walgreens and others sell Plan B (birth control) but not the magazine. Another one said it comes down to the retailer’s rights versus the consumer’s rights. A grad student in MKTG 605 said, “Retailers have the right but does it help or hinder?”

Most commentators condemned the retailers for their censureship. Nicholas Johnson (2013) wrote: “Of course, stores have the legal right to choose what magazines they sell. But it’s hard to understand, let alone approve of, these corporations’ censorship actions. They are reminiscent of Nazi book-burning …” Author Paul Levinson commented that “the boycotters, not the magazine, are the ones who shirked an important public responsibility” (Goodale, 2013, August 1st). He “holds that a public store has a certain responsibility to make ideas available in the marketplace” (Goodale, 2013, August 1st). Journalism professor Mark Tatge pointed out, “’Choking off or censoring stories like these is not the solution to the problem, nor does it help us move forward as a society’” (Goodale, 2013, July 17th). Northeastern University journalism professor Dan Kennedy said, “no retailers refused to carry the New York Times when it used the same picture on its front pages, and said the [furor] may have been driven by a lack of understanding of the kind of journalism Rolling Stone does” (Gabbatt, 2013).

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