The Unraveling of the Narrative

JOURNALISM

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All private individuals have had their names changed for the purpose of this submission.

The sprawling white canvas tents propped up along the broad red brick plazas of Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park looked like structures out of a busy fairground or festival, but on the morning of July 29, they stood vacant, devoid of movement except for the gentle rustling of fabric in the wind. The tents were fenced off by metal gates and security guards wearing fluorescent yellow vests, blocking public access to the entire north end of the park.

It was here, among soaring stone sculptures and the distant sounds of downtown Atlanta traffic, that I started looking for the traces of something that had happened two decades ago.

These traces were, admittedly, quite easy to find: the white tents all surrounded an elaborate, orange-purple concert stage embossed with the logo of the 1996 Olympic games. Other anachronisms were just as commonplace, as evidenced by the '90s police cars and television production trucks lining the open avenues.

Only the filming towers accompanying the white tents and prop vehicles distinguished the tents' true nature: the film set of Clint Eastwood's *Richard Jewell*.

I wasn't here to cover the filming, though; instead, I was here to relive the real-life subject of the film: Richard Jewell, an ordinary man suddenly thrust into the national spotlight as a hero figure, and whose narrative had begun in this park. It was a narrative that took a dark turn, for just days after Jewell was minted a hero, his fame became infamy as the press portrayed Jewell to be the murderer of the people he had tried to save.

I use the word "relive" because this happened 23 years ago; Jewell himself died in 2007. As a journalist, the reason I was interested in a long-closed case and Jewell's downfall in the media was for one simple reason: Jewell wasn't actually the villain. He had been a hero all along.

As an institution, journalism has been subjected to more and more scrutiny in recent years. Cries and accusations of "fake news" and bias in the media have frequently plagued the fourth estate, but the vilification of Richard Jewell was a

shortcoming of journalism two decades before "fake news" was first coined by President Trump as a moniker for the critical coverage he faced.

I was in Atlanta to understand the impact the Richard Jewell story had upon an ordinary face in the crowd, as well as to see what has changed about journalism since—or if nothing has changed.

The Bombing

The story starts with the bombing.

Shortly after midnight in Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park on July 27, 1996, in the midst of the 1996 Olympic Games, a homemade pipe bomb placed in the north corner of the downtown green space exploded, sending shrapnel into thousands of revelers attending a concert. In the end, two fatalities and more than 100 casualties were reported in what is known today as the Centennial Park bombing.

Richard Jewell had been a security guard that night; Jewell discovered the bomb in a suspicious backpack shortly before the explosion and led an evacuation away from the bomb site, clearing the area and saving dozens of lives.

Jewell was initially hailed as a national hero, but on July 30, three days after the attack, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported Jewell was being investigated as a suspect by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for perpetrating the bombing. In the course of just a few days, Jewell came to be regarded as a terrorist by the public.

The press—not to mention investigators—encircled Jewell, eager to receive any scrap of new information. According to a 1997 *Vanity Fair* article, sound trucks and boom microphones constantly surrounded Jewell's apartment and unmarked cars followed his every move. In the papers, Jewell's name was repeatedly dragged through the mud; he was compared to Wayne Williams, a known serial killer, and was called a "fat, failed former sheriff's deputy" by the *New York Post*.

Jewell was eventually exonerated two months later, when the FBI officially deemed him no longer a suspect, but by then, the press had tarnished his reputation irreparably.

The Eyewitness

I was in Centennial Park that morning because I had hoped to encounter a survivor or witness of the bombing. Even better, I was looking for someone who remembered Richard Jewell. At first, I had little luck: nobody seemed to have lived in Atlanta so long ago; some had no idea what the bombing was, let alone who Jewell was.

That all changed when I met Victor Major, a tattooed, bearded fifty-something security officer with a gruff Southern drawl overseeing the film set behind from his makeshift command post of a folding chair.

He was gazing into the distance when I introduced myself and knelt in the gravel next to him. Just as I had been doing all morning, I asked him if he had been there at the bombing two decades ago. I couldn't see Major's eyes behind his sunglasses, but there was a brief pause before he replied. Yes, he told me. I was there.

Would he be willing to be interviewed about it? Sure, he said.

I pulled out my notebook and started writing.

Reliving the Past

Out of everyone in Centennial Park I talked to that morning, only five people clearly remembered the bombing, and only Major correctly remembered the subsequent events and Richard Jewell's story.

Major can clearly recall the portrayal of Jewell at the time. "Everybody was convinced that's who [the bomber] was," he said. "That's what they kept coming on the news and saying. It was pretty much projecting it to everybody."

Unsurprisingly, people still misremember the details of what happened to this day, especially regarding Jewell; this is often attributed to the media's portrayal of Jewell. "When a lot of people are paying attention to the news, you think you're looking at facts," Major said.

As a result, the media storm Jewell faced has had far-reaching consequences.

Ron Martz should know; after all, he's one of two reporters that wrote the original article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* revealing the FBI considered Jewell a suspect.

According to Martz, who has since retired from journalism and works as a ghostwriter, co-writer Kathy Scruggs obtained a tip from a law enforcement source that Jewell was under investigation, but the newspaper deliberated over whether to publish the story. "The consensus was that we needed to get a lot more than what we had," Martz said. "Kathy basically had one source, to my knowledge, at that point."

The staff at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* spent a day corroborating their source, according to Martz. As part of their efforts, the two reporters reached out to interview Jewell, but he did not return their calls.

After finishing their draft, Martz attempted to verify the information through an FBI source. "I called my source at the FBI, and read the story to him over the telephone," he said. "I said, 'Are we going to hinder the investigation in any way if we publish the story?', and he said, 'Everybody knows about

it already. It's going to get out sooner or later.' So we decided to go ahead with it that afternoon."

To Martz, the FBI confirmation drove the decision to publish. "My boss at the time came to me and said, 'Call the FBI. If they'll verify this we'll go with the story,'" he said.

I asked Martz if he would have published if the FBI did not verify the story.

"No, we would not have," he told me.

Twenty-three years after the bombing, Martz still argues there was nothing factually wrong with his story. "I continue to insist that we had the story correct," he said. "The implication initially was that Kathy and I made this whole thing about Jewell up, when in fact we had law enforcement sources from at least two different law enforcement agencies."

The article had long-lasting ramifications: after Jewell was declared innocent, Lin Wood, Jewell's lawyer, personally attacked Kathy Scruggs in the resulting libel lawsuits. "Wood tried anything he could do to drag her down," Martz said. "This whole story had a severe health impact on her."

Scruggs's colleagues watched her slip deeper into poor health and reckless behavior. On Sept. 2, 2001, Scruggs was found dead from a drug overdose.

Joie Chen, who worked as an anchor at CNN during the 1996 Olympics, broke the news of the bombing on air. Chen echoed Martz's argument that the press coverage was a logical decision at the time. "I don't think that the press was unfair to Jewell," she said. "I think the press was doing its job the best way it knew how to at the time given the circumstances and given our understanding of the relationship with investigators. I think that reporters at the time really were doing their best to get the story right."

Despite this, Martz knows there were still problems in the way he reported the story. According to Martz, the main issue lay in what he called "voice-of-god" style: *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* management did not allow citing anonymous sources and instead instructed reporters to state everything authoritatively. "If we had been allowed to add five words to that first paragraph—'according to law enforcement sources'—none of this would have hit us as hard as it did," Martz said.

At the time, Martz did not have the foresight to insist upon including the five words, but he has since realized what he could have done.

Martz said he was aware of the consequences Jewell would suffer. "I said [at the time] this guy's life is never going to be the same," he said. "And I knew that there was going to be an undue amount of attention on him from the media."

Members of Jewell's immediate family did not respond to requests for comment.

Assigning Responsibility

Both Chen and Martz reflected on the broader view of the events, citing multiple factors that led to Jewell's trial by media. "It was a perfect storm of circumstances that allowed the story to snowball so quickly," Chen said.

It was easy for the public to target Jewell. He was overweight. He lived with his mother. He was, as Martz called him, a "Southern redneck, the kind of guy that people are willing to look at and say, 'Here's a guy that's a real loser.'"

So which party—the press, the police, or even the public—should bear responsibility for Richard Jewell's vilification?

Chen's answer was exactly what I had expected. "Either nobody was guilty, or everybody played a role," she said.

Martz was reluctant to cast blame on a single party.

"It was a combination of the FBI's overeagerness to find a suspect and the media's overeagerness to portray Jewell as, you know—"

Here Martz stopped, refraining from saying the words he had said earlier. According to Martz, that's just the way things happened.

What Has Changed?

Jon Shirek, a local Atlanta news anchor at the time of the bombing, said that situations like Jewell's have only become more commonplace; indeed, similar events have occurred in the Boston Marathon bombing and the Navy Yard shooting. "With social media, everybody is a journalist," he said. "Not everybody is as careful as maybe journalists hope that they are in conveying that information. We have situations where people's lives are impacted in the way that Richard Jewell's was."

Chen agreed, warning journalists to take heed in the future. "I think that it's a caution to all of us," Chen said. "We owe it to the people we cover and the stories that we cover to be more skeptical, to be more careful and to ask harder questions."

Martz took a more pessimistic view; pressure from social media forces journalists to move quickly, sometimes at the cost of fact-checking. "I don't think [journalism] has changed," Martz said. "I think it may—to a certain extent—have gotten worse."

Shirek thinks journalists can learn from Richard Jewell. "This is a textbook case of how one man's life was impacted, even ruined, by this perfect storm," he said.

Rewriting the Narrative

When I visited the film set of Clint Eastwood's *Richard Jewell* in August, the

tents were silent and the replica concert stage was empty; filming was due to begin that night. But even while standing vacant, the set has understandably drawn visitors and their questions. While sitting outside, Major told me about how he has to educate curious passersby on who exactly Richard Jewell was.

To Major, the most tragic aspect of Richard Jewell wasn't his public downfall, but the oft-overlooked fact that Jewell was a hero. "Half the people don't even know who [Richard Jewell] is when they ask me coming through here," he said. "He has nothing here. He's got no plaque. There would have been 50 or more people [killed] had it not been for Richard Jewell. Nobody even knows that." ■