

## Meditations on Fiction: The Case for News Reporting

On November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014, *Rolling Stone* published Sabrina Erderly's 9,000-word feature *A Rape on Campus*. The account, troubling from the onset, detailed in graphic prose the sexual assault of a female student at the University of Virginia.<sup>1</sup> Within hours of the article's publication, all major media outlets had responded with utter shock—at both the students' apparent moral transgressions and the university's blasé attitude—before unanimously condemning college rape. Over the coming months, however, discourse shifted away from the problem of sexual assault and toward concerns over the veracity of the article. As *Rolling Stone* launched into an internal review, *The Washington Post* published a refutation of the bulk of Erderly's narrative,<sup>2</sup> cataloging the many contradictions and holes in the original reportage. But when the dust had settled, with the issue of campus rape finally in the political spotlight, I was left with one question: Did the facts ever matter?

After all, Virginia Woolf notes that fiction is “likely to contain more truth than fact.”<sup>3</sup> No one would ever question that scores of social truths are embedded in the pages of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, nor that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* truthfully captures human nature, despite both works forgoing literal fact. *A Rape on Campus*, too, is truthful. Like the best pieces of literature, it raises a mirror to our own society, posing vital questions and shedding light on an issue that has laid perniciously dormant. Erderly's account, though at least in part fictitious, seemingly accomplished the end goal of educating the public and advocating for victims of sexual assault.

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<sup>1</sup> Erderly, Sabrina "A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA." *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, 19 Nov. 2014. Web. 21 Feb. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Shapiro, T. Rees. "Key Elements of Rolling Stone's U-Va. Gang Rape Allegations in Doubt." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 5 Dec. 2014. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1989. 3. Print.

But fiction fails when it comes to policy and action. A university dean could no more develop reforms based on *A Rape on Campus* than a political scientist could based on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. If fiction allows us to make sense of the present, then it is fact—nagging, burdensome fact—that best enables us to shape the future. When it comes to informed action, not just advocacy, the difference between fact and fiction is palpable. The reporting of the 2012 Delhi gang rape, for example, resulted not only in domestic and foreign pressure to change rape culture in India but also in the actual passage of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, which codified acid attacks, sexual harassment, and stalking into the Indian Penal Code.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Erderly's article did little more than to temporarily close frats on campus,<sup>5</sup> costing many students their social support systems.

The question of why we seek the news feeds into the broader debate over the relative merits of fact and fiction. Pursuing truth through fact—or, as we've come to call it, reporting—presents myriad challenges, far more than fiction ever will. But informed action, action that leads to legitimate solutions, depends on fact, and so we all depend on the news. Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, declares that she resorted to fiction only when she could not find any facts.<sup>6</sup> A reporter cannot afford that luxury.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013." *The Gazette of India* [New Delhi] 2 Apr. 2013, Extraordinary (Published by Authority) sec.: 1-16. *The Gazette of India*. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> "A Message from President Sullivan Regarding Sexual Violence." *UVA Today*. University of Virginia, 22 Nov. 2014. Web. 28 Feb. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1989. 6. Print.