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Hiding the Real Story

By Richard Lourie

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We rarely get the real story. The reasons range from deception to mere distraction.

The Aug. 1 edition of Rolling Stone magazine featured Dzhokar Tsarnaev on its cover. The photograph had a soft-focus, rock-star glamor to it that generated outrage — and sales. The reaction was particularly strong in Boston, with everyone from the mayor to the man in the street weighing in.

After the Rolling Stone issue was released, the media coverage has been all about the cover and the reaction to the cover. There's been nothing about the quality of the article itself or its subject. Of course, most of his friends' remarks were heartbreakingly banal and superficial ("superchill" and "a dude you could always just vibe with").

The article does begin sketching out the two most important things: the process of transformation and his motivations. Not that Tsarnaev is any fount of self-knowledge. He blames the U.S. government for "killing our innocent civilians. ... We Muslims are one body: You hurt one, you hurt us all." He may have been so stoned that he didn't see the obvious fact

that from any day's body count of suicide bombers and car bombs that it's Muslims who kill more innocent Muslims. Going by Tsarnaev's logic, he should have killed Muslims.

Image has taken precedence over substance in the Edward Snowden affair as well. The leaker on the run from Hawaii to Hong Kong to Moscow made for sexier news than the revelations about the National Security Agency, which are, fortunately, now starting to sink in and change things in the U.S.

But what is the real story behind the worldwide terrorism alert that the U.S. called at the beginning of August? A cynic might easily wonder about the timing, just as Bradley Manning is about to be sentenced and Snowden receives asylum in Russia. Are the security agencies desperate to demonstrate their value? If so, the move may have backfired. As Mark Mazzetti of The New York Times pointed out, if Snowden's revelations gave so much valuable information about our surveillance techniques to the enemy, how come they're still "chattering" away on phones and e-mails?

We'll probably never know the real story about the 40-pound pike Putin recently caught, unless his press spokesperson gives away the secret, as he did when Putin "discovered" ancient Greek amphoras when he went scuba diving. Was the pike attached to his line by some obliging assistant?

In the past, all of Putin's muscle flexing and daredevil antics were to demonstrate his macho vigor, but now they may have a different intent: to demonstrate youthfulness. Putin will turn 61 in October and can feel the younger generation noisily and impatiently coming up behind him. He increasingly resembles the angry white men baffled by a multi-ethnic, hi-tech, gay-friendly world who vote Republican in the U.S.

We'll also never know the behind-the-scenes decisions that led to placing a dead man, Sergei Magnitsky, on trial in breach of all legal precedent and practice. Convicting the innocent happens every day in Russian courtrooms, but at least the defendants are alive and present in court. When Putin was in the KGB serving in Dresden and bored with meaningless paperwork, he read Nikolai Gogol's novel, "Dead Souls," whose hero, Chichikov, buys up dead peasants who stay on the census rolls and can thus serve as collateral.

In the spirit of Gogol, I propose that Magnitsky be dug up and placed in a cell to serve out his sentence. If Russia can't be just, at least it can be consistent.

Richard Lourie is the author of "Sakharov: A Biography" and "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin."

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