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Weirdos Riot, Media Gets it Wrong

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The Rainbow story, sadly, is formulaic – a police riot followed by false arrests and prosecutions designed to cover up or obfuscate the original crime.

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to arrest a member of the group, the US Forest Service said Friday.”

Contrast that to the local coverage by the Jackson Hole Star Tribune, the nearest daily newspaper on the ground in Wyoming, who began their story with this lead paragraph:

“US Forest Service officers pointed weapons at children and fired rubber bullets and pepper spray balls at Rainbow Family members while making arrests Thursday evening, according to witnesses.”

The Star Tribune went on to add witness quotes — “They [police] were so violent, like dogs,” and “People yelled at them, you’re shooting children,” — in paragraphs two and three. The News, by contrast, edited the AP story by re-writing the seventh paragraph and moving it up to become the second, reading: “Five members of the group were arrested and one officer slightly injured. A Government vehicle was also damaged.”

Are you thoroughly confused yet? Nowhere does the AP/Buffalo News article mention that the Rainbow event has convened annually for 38 years as a multidenominational gathering to pray for world peace and attempt to model a nonviolent, nonhierarchical, utopian society. As for the “injured officer,” he was examined and released without treatment. And the damaged vehicle? The AP/Buffalo News passive voice sentence construction obfuscates the actor — the entity that damaged the vehicle. A witness on the ground claims she ran in terror after stumbling upon a Forest Service law enforcement officer who was bashing in the window of a government vehicle with his nightstick.

I was a few miles away eating dinner in the woods when the incidents in question occurred — and given my experiences photographing police riots, in retrospect, I’m quite happy not to have been there. What I did witness was an ongoing campaign of harassment orchestrated by the Forest Service and directed at the Rainbows. This included federal officers ticketing Rainbows for infractions that are not illegal in Wyoming — and general harassment such as issuing tickets for dusty windshields to gathering participants who had just driven for an hour on dirt roads through sage desert. The narrative that I put together regarding the police riot, after speaking to a credentialed journalist and credible witnesses who I have known and worked with for years, goes like this:

Forest Service law enforcement officers, who had just spent days at the Rainbow Gathering illegally demanding to search tents, harassing women while using latrines, etc., approached a man in the main meadow area of the Gathering. He would be the “suspect,” though it is unclear of what he is suspected. There is speculation that he’s suspected of sharing marijuana — but this is speculation.

The suspect, to his discredit, ran from the feds, into a place the Rainbows call “Kiddie Village,” which is a sanctuary and kitchen for families with young children and expectant parents, as well as a cooperative day care facility. The feds followed, with their weapons drawn.

Once in Kiddie Village, they encountered a large group preparing to eat dinner. A woman asked them to put their guns away. She was immediately arrested for interfering with a law officer, and placed on the ground. People demanded her release. At some point, officers apprehended the original suspect. One officer stepped backward onto the arrested woman. Thinking she had tripped the officer, three Forest Service agents began beating her. The dinner crowd loudly demanded they stop. The 10 officers opened fire wildly in Kiddie Village, shooting pepper-filled (like pepper spray) ammo at specific people as well as indiscriminately firing and hitting others. People screamed and shouted. The officers pointed a Taser point blank into the face of a journalist.
who was showing his credentials. His presence may have prevented the officers from using greater force. Alarmed parents, hearing the shots, came running into Kiddie Village. Trained Rainbow peacekeepers formed a line, with their backs to the feds, separating them from the growing crowd. The feds shot these peacekeepers in the back with pepper-filled balls. One man alleges he was hit eight times. According to his testimony, when he turned around to ask why they were shooting him while he was trying to help them, they shot him four more times in the chest.

Victims become defendants
The officers took their two prisoners and left the Gathering via a trail through the woods, possibly shooting indiscriminately at passersby on their way out. They spent the next few days demanding that Rainbows who were leaving the Gathering lift their shirts so that officers could check for injuries caused by their weapons. People with welts were arrested and charged. Once charged, they are magically transformed from victims into defendants. Defendants have the choice of fighting false charges, possibly felony charges, in Wyoming courts, or pleading guilty to misdemeanors with suspended sentences and going home, back to work, and back to their lives. This is how justice works in America.

The day after the attack, the Forest Service put out a press release with their spin on the story. While local press in Wyoming and Colorado reported on the Waco- and Ruby-Ridge-like aspects of a violent and unprovoked federal police attack on a child care facility, the national media ran with the Coverup story. When I got back to the land of electricity and email, I read the Buffalo News story and immediately sent this note to News editor Margaret Sullivan:

“You ran an AP story (http://www.buffalonews.com/nationalworld/nation/story/385003.html) based on discredited official sources. I am familiar with the group in question since they were the topic of my doctoral research and book, and I was on site working on a documentary film. A press release from the group is available at http://mediastudy.com/Rbow-08-PoliceRiot.html. I can also put you in touch with a 3rd party journalist who witnessed the event, for a less biased account.

Bottom line – shots fired w/o provocation. Also, your description of the group (eccentrics, young people and hippies) is silly and pejorative.”

Shortly thereafter, I sent Sullivan the link to the Star Tribune’s coverage of the incident. As of press time, I have not heard back from Sullivan or anyone at the News, and the false story stands uncorrected.

For the victims of the Kiddie Village police riot, false news coverage by lazy, compliant “journalists” comprises a second, and sometimes longer-lasting and more devastating, attack. The reality of their status as victims is taken away, and their recovery is undermined by the struggle to get reality recognized in an Orwellian world.

The story here, of course, is much bigger than the Rainbows, the Kiddie Village police riot, the Associated Press, or the Buffalo News. It’s a much more important story about honesty, reality, and bearing witness. It’s about how more and more, as journalists turn their backs on their collective responsibilities, we’re becoming a society ruled by lies and misinformation. We now must add to our ever growing list of things for which to struggle the demand for coherent, honest narratives of reality, for the creation of an accurate documentation of the events of the day.

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