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‘Naïve Kid’ or ‘Virtuoso of Deceit’?:

Tabloid Media Parochialism and the Trials of Amanda Knox

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Abstract

The trial of American college student Amanda Knox for the murder of her British housemate Meredith Kercher divided the international tabloid media, with the portrayal of the accused running the spectrum from wide-eyed ingénue to sex-crazed murderer. The inconsistent editorial approach towards the Knox trial could be seen as an expression of tabloid parochialism, with the public effectively forcing the national media of their homeland to “choose sides” between victim and accused killer. This prompted the American media to portray Amanda Knox as unfairly maligned and persecuted, whilst their counterparts in the British press seized on the scandalous aspects of the case to depict her as the femme fatale killer of one of its own citizens. An analytical evaluation of the ethnocentrism that contributed to the dual narratives surrounding Amanda Knox can illuminate the parochial nature of tabloid journalism and the influence it has on a subjective editorial agenda.

Keywords: journalism, tabloid, parochialism, crime, public relations

## Introduction

The murder of British exchange student Meredith Kercher in the Italian city of Perugia was as notable for the media furor that surrounded it as it was for the brutality of the crime. The case gained immediate notoriety within American popular culture, particularly after Kercher’s housemate and Seattle native Amanda Knox was arrested for murder along with both her boyfriend and employer. The death of Meredith Kercher in 2007 was a fundamentally international media event which pitted the tabloid press of three separate nations in direct conflict; whereas the British and Italian media offered a primarily victim-focused perspective on the murder, the arrest and conviction of Amanda Knox resulted in the American media adopting an approach which portrayed the 20-year-old as an innocent girl being victimized by a corrupt legal system. The diametrically opposing portrayal of Amanda Knox in the global tabloid media served as a manifestation of the parochialism that exists within modern journalism and the manner in which the reality constructed by reporters can be influenced by the audience they are targeting. The media has a significant role to play within popular culture, both as a vehicle for social oversight and as a means of applying public pressure over those in positions of power (Kepplinger, 2007). The parochial biases demonstrated in the Amanda Knox case provide insight into the way that news organisations are able to use their influence to consciously construct the public profile of an individual in a way that best matches the story that they wish for the general public to accept as truth.

While the divergent representations of Knox were influenced and, in many ways, shaped by her American nationality, the division in the media’s portrayal of the case was fundamentally parochial rather than nationalistic. Beliefs about Knox’s relative guilt or innocence were less motivated by an overt anti-American bias than by *who* the media focused on. It was not Kercher’s inherent “Britishness” that afforded her sympathy in the U.K. press, but the fact that she was from the United Kingdom certainly influenced a more victim-centred approach to reporting; in contrast, Knox was not treated as innocent by the American media as a result of her nationality, but rather because her personality received more focus in the U.S. than that of the victim — to the American media, a foreigner (Page, 2014). Naturally, each country’s media focused on the subject of the story that had the strongest connection and resonance for their audience. In itself, this is not nationalistic, but is instead the product of a somewhat myopic and parochial editorial approach (Ali, 2017). It is thus the contention of this article that the contradictory constructions of Amanda Knox in the global press was less a result of purposefully nationalistic reporting than a by-product of parochial journalistic culture tailoring editorial content to the interests of its audience. It is this process of tailoring the story that initially triggered the construction the character of Amanda Knox on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, both as a victim and a villain.

The image of Knox as a sexual deviant—promoted by Italian police and prosecutors as a motive for the murder—fueled the sensationalist approach taken by much of the British tabloid press in ascribing a public persona to the American student. The portrayal of Knox as a sex-crazed killer in the British press was largely rejected within American popular culture, which instead tended towards the characterisation of Knox as a naïve young woman with very limited life experience. Conflicting depictions have contributed to the intrigue surrounding Knox, reflected in the ‘Foxy Knoxy’ label which could be seen as a childhood nickname or a reference to her sexual proclivities depending on the biases of the publication using it. The competing approaches to covering this story in the media have ultimately resulted in the narrative surrounding Kercher’s death being almost irreconcilably compromised by media bias, in turn transforming Amanda Knox into a divisive character who inspires wildly divergent reactions depending on which media portrayal an individual has been primarily exposed to.

## Background

The inconsistent media speculation surrounding Amanda Knox was triggered by the death of her flatmate Meredith Susanna Kercher on November 1, 2007. Kercher, a 21-year-old Londoner, was a student of European politics who had recently moved to Perugia to study as an exchange student; she lived in a ground-floor apartment which she shared with Knox and two Italian women, moving in shortly before her accused murderer on September 10 (Murphy 2007). Kercher was last seen around 8:45 pm on the night of November 1 after having dinner with fellow British expatriates; her body was discovered in her locked bedroom around 1:15 pm the next day, with an autopsy revealing she had died as a result of being fatally stabbed in the neck (BBC News, 2009). Police were initially contacted by Knox, who claimed she had arrived home after spending the night with Italian boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito to find signs that someone had been in her apartment, including a broken window, feces in the toilet, and blood stains in a bathroom she shared with Kercher (Rich, 2011). She said she had attempted to contact Kercher several times throughout the morning, however she had been unable to contact her on either her Italian or British phone number. Knox and Sollecito were both present at the time that Kercher’s body was discovered alongside fellow housemate Filomena Romanelli, several of her friends, and responding officers from the local police force. Although initial reports claimed that bruising on Kercher’s body provided evidence of sexual assault, this was later disputed by a panel of pathologists from Perugia’s forensic science institute (Rawstorne, 2008). Kercher’s body was found on the floor of her bedroom behind a locked door and partially covered by a blanket.

In the hours following the discovery of Meredith Kercher’s body, Perugian police discounted the idea that she had been murdered after unexpectedly encountering burglars in her apartment. As the only one of Kercher’s housemates that was in Perugia at the time of the murder, Amanda Knox was immediately the focus of the police investigation. She and Sollecito attracted the attention of the media shortly after the body was discovered when they were seen to be embracing and kissing outside the crime scene; friends of Kercher also reported that Knox had displayed little emotion while waiting to be questioned by police and spoke clinically about her housemate’s throat being cut (Squires, 2009). Knox was questioned by Perugian police in the days following Kercher’s death before being charged with murder after a prolonged interrogation in the early hours of November 6. The arrest came after Knox made a signed confession which implicated her boss, local bar owner Patrick Lumumba; she later withdrew this statement to police, which she claimed was made under duress after she had been physically assaulted by investigating officers (Moore, 2007). Both Sollecito and Lumumba were also arrested for Kercher’s murder, however, Lumumba was released after providing an alibi for his whereabouts on November 1. Forensic investigation identified Ivory Coast national Rudy Guede as a suspect in the murder, with police extraditing him from Germany to face trial in Perugia. In a fast-tracked trial, Guede was sentenced to thirty years imprisonment for the sexual assault and murder of Meredith Kercher. Despite initially claiming that Knox had not been present at the house when Kercher was murdered, Guede told an appellate court that he had seen her there on November 1 before having his sentence significantly reduced by fourteen years.

After spending over a year in prison, Knox and Sollecito pleaded not guilty of Kercher’s murder when their trial began on 16 January, 2009. Prosecutor Giuliano Mignini alleged in court that Knox had engaged in a physical altercation with Kercher in her bedroom before she and Sollecito forced the victim into a sexual encounter with Guede; it was suggested that Knox held Kercher at knifepoint throughout the sexual assault, fatally stabbing her in the throat at some point during the struggle (*New York Post*, 2011). Despite little forensic evidence linking Knox and Sollecito to the crime scene, both were found guilty of murder and sentenced to 26 and 25 years respectively in December, 2009. An appellate trial that culminated in October 2011 overturned the convictions of Knox and Sollecito after a court-ordered review of the evidence found a range of errors that took place during the forensic investigation of the crime scene. The judges at the appeals trial noted that Knox was

under “great psychological pressure” during the interrogation in which she confessed to Kercher’s murder and described the police interviews of Knox as “obsessive” in duration (*The Journal*, 2013). Despite being vindicated at their first appeal, Knox and Sollecito had their convictions reinstated after a new trial was ordered in 2013, with judges reaching the decision that Guede had restrained Kercher while Knox was responsible for inflicting the fatal wound (Crossley & Nye, 2014). Knox, who had returned to the United States of America by this stage, joined Sollecito in arguing their case before the Italian Supreme Court in early 2015. In this final appeal, both defendants were again found not guilty and – having exhausted every option in the Italian legal system – cannot be tried again for Meredith Kercher’s murder. As can be seen, the process that eventually resulted in Knox and Sollecito’s exoneration was lengthy, and provided a considerable amount of material that was routinely covered in the global media. It is this material that provides insight into the contradictory portrayal of Knox in the media, which is the primary focus of this article.

### Literature Review

The widespread perception that the global media has become increasingly sensationalist in editorial direction has prompted a range of academics to consider the changing nature of the press and its impact on popular culture. Media studies scholar David R. Spencer recounted the origins of sensationist media coverage in the United States of America in his book *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America’s Emergence as a World Power*; Spencer claimed that the jingoistic “yellow journalism” that typified the American media in the late 1800s utilised sensationalist practices which “attracted readers, especially if that sensationalism had something to do with horrible atrocities” (2007, p. 178). He noted that the contemporaneous critique of yellow journalism bore striking similarities to charges levelled against the profession by modern detractors, including the blurring of fact and “the notion of journalism as a mere commodity” (2007, p. ix). Ornebring and Jonsson acknowledged the perspective that tabloid journalism is synonymous with “bad” journalism in a 2004 article published in *Journalism Studies*, wherein they examined the extent to which the tabloid press had historically served the public interest. It was their determination that the tabloid media had often proven more beneficial to news consumers than journalism considered to be “more respectable”; Ornebring and Jonsson argued that the tabloid press provided a platform for alternative discourse regarding current events and described staunch anti-tabloid sentiment as “not very productive” (2004, p. 283). The development of the yellow journalism prevalent in the 1800s into the modern tabloid press is clearly outlined through the current literature, which demonstrates the historical context in which manipulation of editorial direction has played a key role in shaping American popular culture.

The advent of the 24-hour news cycle has had a significant impact on the transformation of popular culture within the United States of America, with academics divided as to the cause of the continued tabloidisation of news programming. Kevin Glynn traced the origins of tabloid culture in television news broadcasting in his 2000 book on the subject, in which he suggested that news programming became increasingly competitive after station management noticed that networks with the best local news ratings tended to have the highest overall ratings within their market. Glynn claimed that tabloid techniques thrived when applied to the production of television news, which allowed journalists to utilise the visual medium in a way that had not been possible in the print industry; he implied an inherent deviancy in a style of journalism which “thrives on the grotesque, the scandalous and the ‘abnormal’... Tabloid media simultaneously defamiliarize the ordinary and banalize the exotic” (2000, p. 7). The role of tabloid news in creating a narrative palatable to a broad cross-section of the American public is supported by Steve M. Barkin, who referenced a critic of the soft approach taken by these programs in describing them as “reality lite”; he also noted the myriad of techniques utilised by television producers to manipulate audiences, essentially transforming any news story into a morality tale designed to elicit an emotional response (2003, p. 67). Despite disagreement within academia regarding the

purposeful use of tabloid television in the American market, a clear consensus can be found within the literature that acknowledges the substantive role played by the visual medium in propagating sensationalist and emotionally manipulative media practices in order to contribute to the construction of American popular culture.

The murder trial of Amanda Knox captured the attention of a global audience, and as a result media coverage of the story attracted considerable scrutiny within the academic field of media studies. In a media content analysis performed by Deidre Freyenberger in 2013, the recurrence and tone of newspaper coverage related to the Knox case was evaluated across 500 prominent international publications. Freyenberger’s research findings clearly showed that reportage of the case in the United Kingdom and Ireland was predominantly negative in its framing of the accused murderer. Differences in the coverage of the Knox case in British and American popular culture was also examined by Bria Ballard in a 2011 article, in which it was asserted that the British press utilised sexual and physical descriptions in a provocative manner that was not seen in equivalent American publications. Ballard’s media analysis focused primarily on the differences in coverage in *The Guardian* and the *New York Times*, utilising thirteen articles from each newspaper in order to achieve comparability. Knox achieved international prominence as a highly divisive figure, essentially transitioning from American college student to celebrity criminal. In a 2013 article focused on the *Daily Mail*’s reportage of the Knox case in the United Kingdom, Simkin claimed that media coverage effectively explored “contemporary attitudes towards transgressive female sexuality” and the connection between celebrity, sex and violence (2013, p. 3). Simkin’s article was one of several which reflected upon the traditional narrative construction of the violent female in the media and attempted to evaluate whether Knox was the victim of a character assassination carried out by the global tabloid press.

### Methodology

In order to determine the ways in which a parochial perspective of the Amanda Knox case was able to influence her position within popular culture, it is essential to employ a range of techniques associated with qualitative research. The relatively unique circumstances of the Knox case would suggest that researching its relationship to media effects theory would be fundamentally phenomenological; that being said, the divergent portrayal of the situation in the international media has clear implications for the coverage of major news events and the construction of a coherent journalistic narrative (Gregorc, 1984). Given the pervasive and multiplatform nature of modern journalism, it would be difficult to restrict a media analysis solely to the print or broadcast medium; given the conventional argument that Knox gained notoriety based on her appearance, it would be highly negligent to conduct an evaluation that only considers rhetoric as a means of communication (Messaris, 1998, p. 71). In order to study the impact that media coverage has on shaping popular culture, a textual analysis was undertaken that was focused on how editorial direction differed based on the market in which it was published. It was determined that an examination of editorial decision-making would be highlighted best by a binary approach that specifically concentrated on media reportage from the predominant stakeholders in the Knox case – the respective home countries of the victim and her accused killer.

An exploration of the press portrayal of Meredith Kercher’s murder would typically require the significant use of media content analysis, however, there is considerable debate within the academic community regarding the best approach to take when conducting an investigation of media phenomena. In her 2002 book *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, Kimberly Neuendorf claimed that this form of media research was inherently quantitative and served as a useful means to summarise the rhetoric used and perspective expressed in a body of journalistic content through a largely scientific approach. This understanding of media content analysis was disputed by Shoemaker and Reese, who argued that the research was not purely quantitative and could be utilised in a broader, contextualised manner. Shoemaker and Reese suggested that the behaviourist approach to

media content analysis concentrated on the impact made by media product in the wider community, whereas subscribing to the humanist tradition allowed researchers to explore the social conditions that caused the editorial direction to take shape (Shoemaker & Reese, 2011). In studying the Knox case, it is important to utilise the more broadly sociological approach advocated by Shoemaker and Reese in order to fully examine that spectrum of phenomenological aspects associated with such a volatile and complex cultural event.

Textual analysis was used as a more holistic way of examining editorial bias, taking into account a broad cross-section of factors that contributed to the construction of Knox’s public identity (Tewksbury 2003). In this case, the media product that was selected for examination transcended mediums and included print, digital and television sources. Reports were selected based on the amount of views or page visits they had received. To ensure equal attention was given to both British and American sources, the top ten visited reports from each country were focused on. While this is a basic way of selecting reports for inclusion, it was determined that it would be the best method of analysing the reports that achieved the greatest reach and, theoretically, would have had the most significant impact on constructing Knox’s identity amongst the general public. As a result, it was necessary to evaluate material on an individual, case-by-case basis rather than using a more traditional content analysis. Elements of media bias and construction that were considered in determining parochial bias ranged from language in articles and headlines to the choice of visual imagery used to illustrate a story (Knobloch et al., 2003). Media reports were placed on a five-point Likert scale that classified it as (1) highly prejudicial against Knox, (2) somewhat prejudicial against Knox, (3) neutral, (4) somewhat prejudicial towards Knox, and (5) highly prejudicial towards Knox. The decision of where to place articles on the scale was determined holistically. In the future, a more limited study of a single media type would be useful as it would be possible to undertake a content analysis that looks for specific key words; in this case, it was determined that language choices were too varied to accomplish this while providing a more broad scope on the topic. The difference in language choices was particularly notable when comparing British and American sources, a result of the significant stylistic differences that exist between U.S. media and the British tabloid press (Conboy, 2006).

## Discussion

### The “Enchanting Witch” – Amanda Knox in the British Tabloid Press

Tabloid newspapers in the United Kingdom are notorious for the way in which they intentionally draw upon populist sentiment in order to sensationalise stories and cultivate ongoing public interest. Despite the general decline of the print medium as a form of journalism, British newspapers have been able to maintain a modicum of relevance based largely on the populist approach they have taken to news stories like the Amanda Knox murder trial (Shah et al., 2001). The murder of Meredith Kercher evoked a significant emotional response from the British public, with the brutal nature of the crime and the victim’s youth fostering traditional fears regarding the dangers of travelling abroad. The demand for justice that emanated from the British tabloid press found a kind of pantomime villain with the arrest of Amanda Knox, who had already attracted negative media attention in Italy as a result of her actions immediately following the discovery of Kercher’s body. In 90 percent of the British media reports examined, Knox was portrayed as cold and unaffected by the murder when journalists recorded her warmly embracing boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito only a short distance from where Kercher’s body was discovered; this early media portrayal of Knox led to later characterisations of the American student as “vivacious” and “sexually adventurous” in broadsheet publications like *The Independent* (Popham, 2009). The focus on salaciousness in the British tabloid press become somewhat fixated on the sexual aspects of the Knox case, drawing upon the accused killer’s attractive physical appearance to support the view of Italian prosecutors that she was a sex-crazed temptress.

The sexualisation of Amanda Knox in the British tabloid press served a dual purpose in its construction of a narrative around the murder of Meredith Kercher. On a superficial level, the dissonance between the horrific nature of the crime and the appeal of Knox’s physical appearance provided publications with a visual point of interest with which they were able to attract reader attention from the newsstand (Busby, 1975). By emphasising Knox’s aesthetic appeal, British publications were also able to persuade readers that the accused killer was capable of the sexually charged crime for which she was being accused; the woman referred to as a “black-widow beauty” by online magazine *Sabotage Times* was credited in the press as the mastermind of a depraved sex crime which had resulted in the death of her innocent British housemate (Waller, 2013). An article published in leading British tabloid the *Daily Mirror* on January 31, 2014, listed the number one thing learned from the Knox case as “if you’re pretty people think you’re incapable of murder”; it claimed that “since the beginning of time the good-looking and glamorous have had a better chance at dodging justice” and chastised Knox’s supporters in saying that “somehow, a symmetrical face makes us want to think the best of people.” The constant references to Knox’s physical appearance in the British tabloid press – whether as proof of her guilt as a sex-crazed killer or not—have distinctly negative connotations and demonstrate the tendency of media organisation to manipulate the aesthetics of a situation in order to construct a narrative that best suits their editorial agenda.

In an attempt to provide justification for its negative portrayal of Amanda Knox, the British tabloid press utilised elements of the American student’s personal history to affirm the perspective that she was guilty of murder. The most significant aspect of Knox’s past referred to in the British media was the childhood nickname “Foxy Knoxy,” with editorial decision-makers choosing to use the term as a key descriptor in characterizing the accused killer; although Knox claimed that the nickname was a reference to her prowess as a soccer player, the British press insinuated that use of the word “foxy” was indicative of a reputation for physical attractiveness and – potentially – sexual promiscuity (Simkin, 2013). Of the ten British reports examined in this study, some variation of the term ‘Foxy Knoxy’ was used in 70 percent, though not all highlighted the sexualised connotations given to the nickname in some sectors of the British press. The prolific usage of the “Foxy Knoxy” moniker has been credited to freelance journalist Nick Pisa, who made the discovery while investigating Knox’s MySpace account on behalf of Britain’s *Daily Mail*. Deputy editor of *Spiked* magazine Tim Black claimed in early 2014 that Pisa’s introduction of the “Foxy Knoxy” sobriquet had effectively “cemented her reputation as some sort of sinister temptress” and that it hardly mattered to the general public that the title referred to something other than her sexual proclivities (Black, 2014). The widespread use of the “Foxy Knoxy” characterization in the British media reached a crescendo after commentator Matthew Wright was forced to apologize for including a call-in session regarding whether viewers would have sex with Knox on his popular news program *The Wright Stuff* in 2011; a blurb that accompanied the segment on the Channel 5 website referred to Knox as someone who was “undeniably fit and loves wild sex” in a clear reflection of popular opinion towards Knox in the United Kingdom (Attewill, 2011).

The tendency to vilify Amanda Knox in the British media has been attributed by some commentators to anti-American sentiment, with parochial concerns transforming the case into a broader indictment of American society. Black (2014) claimed that Italian prosecutors were supported by the European media in its portrayal of Knox as the archetypal American youth as “her partying and perceived promiscuity are deemed to illustrate America’s lack of a moral compass, its decadence.” In conducting its coverage of the Knox case as a referendum on American values, the British media constructed a narrative that was essentially “Kercher’s English reserve versus Knox’s American exuberance”; a 2014 article published in *The Guardian* claimed the key figures in the Kercher murder case became representative of their nationality and as such were vulnerable to parochial prejudices impacting on perceptions of guilt and innocence (Richardson, 2014). Every report published in the British media that was examined for this study referred to Knox’s nationality: while most (60 percent) used it passively as an identifier, several (20 percent) implicitly connected Knox’s aberrant behaviours

to the fact that she was American and, thus, adhered to different social norms to her British counterparts. Meredith Kercher’s father John disputed claims that the Knox case was heavily influenced by an anti-American bias, claiming that his daughter’s accused killers had “been judged on the evidence, not on where they have come from”; his statement to the press came shortly after senior politicians from Knox’s home state of Washington publically suggested that aggressive anti-Americanism in the European media may have tainted the trial and contributed to the jury returning a guilty verdict in 2009 (Parry, 2009). Concerns regarding the impact of prejudicial press coverage became a staple of the American media in the aftermath of Knox’s murder conviction, significantly intensifying the divergent characterisation of the case in the international media.

### **The Innocent Abroad – Amanda Knox in the American Media**

Despite the largely negative portrayal of Amanda Knox in the British and European press, the American media approached the Meredith Kercher murder case in a distinctly different manner. In many respects, the American media “played it straight” when it came to the Knox trial, focusing objectively on the details of the case until Knox was pronounced guilty of murder: when it came to reports examined that were published prior to the verdict (60 percent), all but one declined from taking a definitive stance on her guilt. In the aftermath of the court’s decision, a number of major news organisation in the United States of America began a concerted campaign to promote the convicted killer’s innocence (Babington, 2011). In an article for *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Alex Rees said the American public had been “presented with a double narrative” when it came to Knox with a “slight bias towards her innocence”; this view was supported by a 2013 ABC News/Washington Post poll which found that around 65 percent of Americans felt sympathetic towards Knox (Rees, 2014). The poll, conducted with a random sample of 1003 adults, also found that support for Knox was highest among those over the age of 50; ABC News analysts suggested that this was due to the higher potential that the individual polled had a daughter or granddaughter Knox’s age (Langer, 2013). Dan Abrams, a reporter for the American network ABC, admitted that the American media had essentially found Knox not guilty and had tailored its coverage around that narrative; in an interview on CNN on February 2, 2014, Abrams said “the media can make a judgment” that there was not a compelling case of murder and “act accordingly” (CNN, 2014). There are clear links between the prevailingly positive coverage of Amanda Knox in the American media and the groundswell of public support, setting the tone for parochial divergence in the popular culture narrative surrounding the case in the US.

In the same way that the British media utilised Knox’s appearance in an attempt to portray her in a sexualised manner, news organisations in the United States of America also constructed a narrative around the young woman’s physical appearance. Instead of referring to her as sexually attractive, Knox was portrayed as a wholesome girl-next-door that would not be capable of committing the sexually-charged murder for which she was facing trial. Of the ten American articles examined for this study, only two referred to her sexuality in any way; both referred to it only insofar as to criticise the European media’s perspective on the case. Kiri Blakeley’s description of Knox in an article for *Forbes* clearly outlined the divergent aesthetic portrayal of the case: she claimed that “Foxy Knoxy” was – in actuality – “a pretty brunette with a pudgy face” (Blakeley, 2011). An article written for the *Harvard Political Review* by Alex Koenig supported the view that Knox’s appearance had garnered sympathy for her plight within American popular culture; he said Knox’s “white sorority sister” appearance made it hard for audiences to believe that she could be responsible for committing a brutal murder (Koenig, 2011). Knox was portrayed in the American media in a way that emphasised the features she shared with the stereotypical female college student; in doing so, news organisation characterised Knox in a way that made her relatable to a broad cross-section of the audience.

Disproportionate parochial support of Knox in American popular culture can be partially attributed to the Knox family hiring a public relations firm to manage Amanda’s image in the national media. Eight days

after Meredith Kercher was killed in the bedroom of her Perugian apartment, Knox’s father Curt engaged Seattle publicist David Marriott in an effort to change public sentiment towards his daughter; the move came three days after Amanda was arrested for murder, at a time when negative coverage in the British and European tabloids had begun to filter into the American media discourse (Dietrich, 2011). Marriott and his team at Gogerty Marriott Public Relations Inc. took an aggressive approach towards rehabilitating Knox’s tarnished public image by restricting access to the Knox family to journalists who promised positive coverage of the accused murderer. Freelance contributor Selene Nelson claimed in the *Huffington Post* that the Knox trial was less about sex and violence than it was about control of public perception in the modern media; the article titled “Was Amanda Knox Innocent or Did She Just Have Good PR?” referenced the Knox family’s consistent attempts to implicate Rudy Guede as Kercher’s murderer and went on to question “how much easier it is to manipulate your image when you have the power to control it” (Nelson, 2014). It is evident that the Knox family’s utilisation of a professional public relations firm contributed to her positive portrayal within American popular culture, widening the gap between public perceptions on either side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Tabloid television places considerable emphasis on the importance of the exclusive interview as a means of gaining viewers and adding a fresh angle to an ongoing story. Television news were featured several times (30 percent) in the ten American reports selected that focused on Knox; in contrast, there were no television reports in the top ten most viewed British media articles on the subject. As a story that attracted substantial public attention, the first interview given by Amanda Knox was a significant media event in its own right; commercial television network ABC hosted a prime time interview between Knox and veteran newscaster Diane Sawyer to coincide with the release of Knox’s memoir on April 30, 2013 (Strochlic & Teitelbaum, 2013). Unlike their British counterparts, American news organisation are typically reluctant to pay interviewees for their participation, however, there are several methods that are utilised in order to incentivise subjects, including the licensing of photographs and other materials for a fee (Schneider, 2011). In the period that Knox was on the television interview circuit, the prevailing trend was to avoid any mention of the sexual allegations levelled against her by the Italian courts and in the European press. The backlash against Cuomo highlights the reverence with which the American television media treated Knox, despite the clear justification behind making reference to the scandalous aspects of her public image. By shielding Knox from the criticism against her in television interviews, the American media essentially perpetuated the alternative view that she was an innocent victim of slander and misrepresentation.

### **Divergent Portrayals of Female Sexuality in Anglo-American Popular Culture**

One of the key elements of the media’s depiction of women in which the United Kingdom and the United States of America differ is through the portrayal of female sexuality. American popular culture has attracted significant criticism for its contribution to an increasingly sexualised society; although there is clearly merit in this perspective, it could be argued that the American media has constructed a restrictive model of female sexuality that precluded Knox’s portrayal as a deviant character. Julia Wood noted in a 1994 article on gender representation that aggressive sexual stereotypes propagated by the American media were predominantly associated with men; the portrayal of women within American popular culture had become intrinsically linked with more passive characteristics such as physical beauty and powerlessness. Wood claimed that, as a result, “women are portrayed alternatively either as decorative objects, who must attract a man to be valuable, or as victims of men’s sexual impulses” (Wood, 1994, p. 239). This representation of female sexuality meant it was difficult for American news organisation to characterise Knox in the same way as their British counterparts; as a young woman that did not reflect the voluptuous aesthetic qualities traditionally found in the American media, Knox became firmly established as a “girl-next-door” figure that triggered empathy rather than sexual desire (Russell et al., 2010). The passive portrayal of Knox’s sexuality in American popular culture was augmented by

her background as a college student with relatively little life experience. Instead of being cast as a deviant and sexually experimental, Knox took on the role of an ingénue whose behaviour was the result of an unsophisticated and naïve understanding of the world (Nadeau & Helling, 2010). Knox’s sympathetic characterisation in American popular culture was not complemented by journalists in the United Kingdom, who traditionally take a considerably different approach to issues of female sexual aggression.

The relatively limited nature of female sexualisation in the American media is further highlighted when contrasted against the British system, in which sexual objectification has been noted as a significant industry concern. The Leveson Inquiry was established 2011 as a means of exploring media culture and journalistic ethics in the United Kingdom; testimony presented to the inquiry by a coalition of women’s rights organisation claimed that the sexual objectification of women was endemic within British journalism (Hornsby, 2013). The coalition claimed that the British press routinely engaged in the “normalisation of images and stories which sexualise and objectify women in every edition of particular newspapers”; this perspective was supported in Lord Leveson’s final report, in which he agreed that the tabloid press had a “tendency to sexualise and demean women” and failed to demonstrate “respect for the dignity and equality of women generally” (Leveson, 2012, p. 660). Although the American media has attracted significant criticism for the sexualisation of popular culture, strict conditions are applied to media organisation regarding the depiction of female sexuality; these firm standards do not exist within the British press, many of which continue to feature topless “Page 3” models without any apparent news value (Johnson 2012). The normalisation of female sexuality regularly extends beyond publication of titillating imagery, with the tabloid press typically free to sensationalise the sexual aspect of news stories in an effort to attract attention within the highly competitive British media environment. Widespread sexualisation in the British tabloid press clearly paved the way for the sensationalist coverage of the Kercher murder, with editorial decisions that favoured the depiction of Knox as a sexual deviant rather than the archetypal “girl-next-door” in an effort to build public interest and serve the commercial interests of news organisations.

### **Parochialism and Serving Commercial Interests in the Modern Media**

Despite the fact that the Meredith Kercher murder was a case that had global ramifications, the commercial nature of tabloid journalism inevitably contributed to parochial narratives targeted at specific media markets. Aitchison and Lewis claimed in their 2004 book *New Media Language* that “global traumas have long been personalised by journalists” in an attempt to convey the situation in a way that achieves the maximum emotional impact on news consumers; tabloid publications have traditionally built their rhetorical approach on a foundation of populism in order to “(speak) for the people in a rhetoric which is able to claim an element of authenticity” (Aitchison & Lewis, 2004, p. 2). In order to tailor a publication’s editorial direction based on populist principles, news organisations are also forced to become somewhat parochial in their determination of what readers will respond to; this does not assume that parochialism is synonymous with localism, however, it does mean that the construction of a narrative would be dependent on the unique socio-cultural considerations of the location of its publication (Kramer, 2014). Parochialism in the tabloid media should be seen as an element of the editorial process, rather than a by-product of differences in the regulations governing journalists in individual countries. Decisions about whether certain perspectives are marginalised in the media are ultimately made at an editorial level, and as such it is implausible for alternative discourses to take prominent positions within any commercial publication. By engaging with the ethnocentric considerations of their audience, the tabloid press is able to ensure that its rhetoric is reflective of popular culture and as such likely to appeal to its specific target market.

Ethnocentrism and parochial journalism played a considerable role in the dual narratives that formed around Amanda Knox, with a clear distinction between her simultaneous portrayal as a deviant killer and an

innocent victim. Media organisations are typically viewed as being responsible for performing a public service and, as such, there is a general expectation that the material that has been published or broadcasted can be supported by objective and confirmable information (Mindich, 2000). Despite this expectation, an element of ethnocentrism can often have a pervasive impact on editorial content in a manner that obscures or omits information that is not consistent with the publication’s editorial agenda. In a study that charted the early influence of television, Gans claimed that ethnocentrism was an enduring factor in American commercial news broadcasts; the 1979 study suggested that ethnocentrism was most often expressed when news organisations operated under the tacit assumption that the United States of America was the most important nation in the world. By placing an American value system ahead of those of other nations, the American media demonstrates an inherent favouritism toward its own citizens; in the case of the Kercher murder trial, this allowed media outlets to throw their support behind Knox as a victimized American in a clear attempt to rally public support to her cause. The parochialism underpinning this editorial decision is clear: by painting Knox as a victim, news organisations were able to cultivate interest in her case as a cause célèbre in defense of wrongfully accused American citizens (CBS News, 2013). The case against Knox effectively became an indictment of American values, with the media’s parochial approach feeding her construction as a blameless figure caught in the midst of a broader ideological dispute.

### **Justice for Meredith and Victim-centred Reportage in the Tabloid Press**

It is a common aspect of contemporary media culture to focus reportage on the individual accused of a crime rather than the victim at the centre of the story. This is particularly true in prominent cases like the Kercher murder, wherein media speculation regarding Knox’s guilt far outweighed references to the victim and those affected by her death. As more details were released that highlighted Knox’s eccentric behaviour, she increasingly became the focal point of the media narrative, effectively relegating Kercher to a secondary position as the catalyst for events rather than an active participant (Kercher, 2012). Positive coverage of Knox in the American media was largely achieved through the marginalisation of Kercher and her victimhood. In order to cast Knox as the sole victim of injustice, it was essential to divert attention from the graphic details of Kercher’s murder and avoid mention of the narrative’s original casualty (Annunziato, 2011). Coverage focusing primarily on Knox was common to news organisations throughout the world, however, persistent reference to Kercher as a victim was a key characteristic of the British media’s approach to the story. While the American media reports that mentioned Kercher usually did so to provide context to Knox’s plight, the British media more frequently described Kercher’s background and gave voice to her family and friends. This victim-centred editorial agenda was largely guided by Kercher’s nationality, leading news organisations to enhance coverage of the murder’s human impact and foster an emotional connection with the story (Macdonald 1998). By humanising Kercher and consistently demanding justice for her murder, the British media influenced public sentiment regarding the story and effectively drove a wedge between its narrative and that presented within American popular culture.

In the same way that Knox’s appearance and behaviour made her a prime candidate for media attention, Kercher demonstrated many characteristics that made her an appealing prospect for the victim-centred approach of the British press. Christie described the media’s version of an “ideal victim” in 1986 as the type of individual that could be seen as vulnerable, defenceless or worthy of compassion; whereas the vast majority of victims could be perceived in this manner, a hierarchy of victimisation serves to categorise individuals across the relatively broad spectrum. Despite limited mention in the American media, news organisations in the United Kingdom portrayed Kercher as a young, intelligent and family-orientated woman. The fact that she was killed while studying in a foreign country also contributed to the parochially-driven coverage, with many news organisations tacitly suggesting that Kercher was particularly vulnerable whilst outside the United Kingdom

(Mawby, 2000). Media coverage of the Kercher murder was purposefully designed to elicit an empathetic response within British society, however, it could be argued that this approach had a reactively converse effect on the representation of her accused killer. By constructing a narrative in which Kercher was the innocent victim of brutal violence, the British media fundamentally enflamed the public demand for justice; given that she had been portrayed as a cold and unremorseful killer, the public formed a highly antagonistic relationship with Knox that inextricably coloured their perspective on every development in the story (Richardson, 2014). Parochialism in the British media led to a victim-centred narrative that came at the expense of Knox, whose depiction as a murderer was diametrically opposed to the idealised image the press constructed around Kercher.

### Conclusion

Sensationalism and parochial populism played a significant role in the coverage of Meredith Kercher’s murder and the subsequent trial of Amanda Knox. Although the portrayal of Knox differed between British and American popular culture, her eccentric behaviour and attractive appearance made her an ideal subject for news organisations to confer a pseudo-celebrity status upon. Knox’s prominence in the international media turned the American student into a household name throughout the world, however public sentiment varied considerably based on which version of “Amanda Knox” they had been exposed to. The dual narrative that existed around Knox stemmed primarily from news organisations adopting an ethnocentric approach in their coverage of the story, with most of the sensationalised and negative reportage emanating from the British tabloid media. In response to the brutal murder of a British citizen, these publications demanded justice and depicted Kercher’s accused killer as a pantomime villain that was worthy of the vitriolic coverage she received. As the British press stood united in support of Kercher and her family, the American media took a similar stance in demanding justice for Knox. News organisations in the United States of America presented Knox as a naïve ingénue that had been unjustly imprisoned for a crime she had not committed. Parochial concerns undoubtedly impacted the media’s judgment of Knox’s innocence, giving rise to the divergent depictions of the accused killer that developed on each side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Parochialism was clearly an influence in the media’s assumption of Knox’s guilt or innocence, however ethnocentrism also played a considerable role in the competing representations of Knox as a person. British tabloid newspapers were largely responsible for the creation of the “Foxy Knoxy” character, using an innocuous childhood nickname as a way of referencing Knox’s alleged sexual deviance. The widespread perception that Knox was inordinately sexually promiscuous came primarily as a result of the British and European media’s preoccupation with this aspect of her personal history; these characteristics were downplayed significantly in the American media, paving the way for journalists and commentators to characterise her as the stereotypical “girl-next-door.” Both victim and accused killer were attractive young women of a similar age and background, however the inconsistent portrayal of Knox in the media turned the story into a referendum on her sexuality and personal history. Under the characterisation presented within popular culture, Knox was the girl-next-door who could not be capable of committing a brutal murder; for the British public, however, Kercher could also be considered as the typical girl-next-door who deserved to receive justice. It is clear that the portrayal of Knox within popular culture was largely the by-product of editorial decision-making and was guided by a notable expression of ethnocentrism, with parochial journalism responsible for the contrary presentations of the American student as both deviant and innocent victim.

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