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## **Op-ed: Trial by Media - The Case of Amanda Knox**

**The media continues to hold sway over the truth in the Amanda Knox case.**

**By Victoria A. Brownworth**

**February 10 2014 7:46 PM EST**

They called her "Foxy Knoxy" almost from the start. The pretty, young American student living in Perugia, Italy, working at a bar in the evenings and attending classes by day. Amanda Knox had fallen in love with Perugia on a trip to Italy when she was 15. Five years later, she was living there—on her own, free from the constraints of family and chaperones, involved with a young Italian man, Raffaele Sollecito, a few years older than she.

In 2007, she was sharing an apartment with two Italian women students and a British exchange student, Meredith Kercher, who, like Knox, had fallen in love with Italy at 15. By all accounts Kercher was a lovely young woman. Smart, pretty, funny and fun-loving. She was immensely popular, and like Knox, working and studying while enjoying the freedom of being far from home. Knox and Kercher were roommates, but not necessarily friends. Kercher spent time with British friends, while Knox spent more time with Italians.

It was All Soul's Day, Nov. 2, 2007 when Kercher was found dead in hers and Knox's apartment, stabbed to death after having been beaten and sexually assaulted. An autopsy report concluded she had died from the three cuts to her throat, but that she had died slowly, as the artery had not been slashed. Hand-prints on her face and neck allegedly matched Knox's as did a bloody footprint. Two months-long trials would later posit that Knox had held Kercher down in a sex game/menage that went awry with Kercher, Knox, Sollecito and Rudy Guede, an acquaintance of other students living in the apartment building.

Knox told police she had come home from Sollecito's apartment to find Kercher's door locked. She allegedly found drops of blood on the floor of their shared bathroom and feces in their toilet. She took a shower and left the apartment. Some time later she and Sollecito called the police. The door to Kercher's room was broken in and her bloody body was found under a duvet.

Knox and Sollecito were taken in for questioning. The Italian roommates were out of town. On Nov. 5, both Knox and Sollecito were arrested and charged with sexual assault, staging a burglary and murder, among other charges.

Knox asserted that her boss, Patrick Lumumba, a Congolese native and single father, was the murderer and that she had heard Kercher scream while Kercher was with Lumumba, but had done nothing.

No evidence that Lumumba had ever been near the apartment was found and Knox later admitted she had lied about Lumumba. She was sentenced to an additional four years in prison for false incrimination. She was ordered to pay 32,000Euros in restitution and 40,000Euros in court fees Lumumba incurred in the first trial. Lumumba has asserted that Knox is guilty and that she "destroyed my life" with the false accusation that kept him in prison awaiting trial.

After the Jan. 31 conviction was announced, Lumumba told London's Channel 5 News, "I'd like to tell Amanda that she's completely destroyed my life. She made me, my family, my friends suffer. She should be writing to me to apologize."

Lumumba also said, "I think Amanda blamed me because she wanted to protect herself. She chose me because it would be much easier for everyone to think that a black guy had done it. It was her strategy and she almost succeeded."

Knox told police she had "covered her ears as he [Lumumba] killed" Kercher and her screams pierced the apartment.

I've covered a number of murders, including several high-profile cases, in my journalistic career. One of my earliest major assignments was covering the murder of Eigel Vesti, a young, gay fashion model in New York City who was murdered at the height of the club scene in a grisly S/M killing. I was contracted by Simon & Schuster to write a book about another high-visibility killing—that of Steven Redman, a high school senior, by his classmate and former friend, Robert Rosenkrantz. Redman had allegedly outed Rosenkrantz, so Rosenkrantz shot him the night of their graduation.

But it was the so-called Trial of the Century that I wrote about when I was at the Philadelphia Daily News that is most like the case of Amanda Knox. The first Knox trial lasted nearly as long as that of O.J. Simpson and similar controversy swirled around it. There was no Johnnie Cochran to assert, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit," but there were many similarities to that well-known trial of the former NFL star.

Except unlike Simpson, Knox was convicted. Twice. First in 2009 after an 11-month trial and again January 31, after a second, four-months-long trial. In 2011, the 2009 verdict was overturned on appeal, citing procedural issues. But the second trial was succinct: blood and DNA evidence, false alibis, witness reports all put Knox, Sollecito and Guede at the scene of the crime. Guede, who is black and who has also asserted his innocence like Knox and Sollecito, has remained in prison since 2007 and is scheduled for release soon. He was convicted in a separate trial and was sentenced to 16 years in prison.

The Italian court ruled Jan. 31 that Knox, now 26, and her ex-boyfriend, Sollecito, now 29, did indeed kill the 21-year-old London student in Perugia in 2007. Their 2011 acquittal of the 2009 conviction was itself overturned last year, after Italy's highest court ruled the appeals process had not been handled properly.

On Jan. 31, Knox was sentenced to 28-and-a-half years in jail while Sollecito was given 25 years in jail. Meredith Kercher's sister Stephanie and brother Lyle could be seen smiling after the verdict. The Kercher family has urged the U.S. to "allow justice to be served" and "extradite Knox immediately to serve her sentence." Knox refused to appear in Italy for the trial, saying she could not afford the trip, although she received a \$4 million book advance in 2011. The U.S. has an extradition treaty with Italy. It would be highly unusual for the U.S. to refuse to extradite a convicted defendant.

Knox and Sollecito are both appealing the Jan. 31 verdict, which could take as long as a year. Knox has vowed to fight the verdict. Sollecito told CNN's Anderson Cooper on Feb. 4 that he was only convicted the second time because the court presumed he had to be guilty since he was Knox's boyfriend. He once again asserted his innocence.

The most common response to the murder of Meredith Kercher is, "We'll never know what happened." Similar to what has been said of victims Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman in the O.J. Simpson trial.

Is Knox guilty? Two long, complicated trials have said yes. Knox's massive PR machine—much like Simpson's—says no. That PR machine also ignores the fact that Knox falsely accused a black man of the murder and that he spent time in prison solely because of her accusation that she saw him take Kercher into the bedroom and heard her scream—while she, Knox, did nothing.

Angelina Antoinetti, Knox's personal prison guard, told reporters after the conviction on Jan. 31 that Knox has reinvented herself for the media.

"Now she's become this TV star, who cares passionately about what happened to her 'friend' Meredith Kercher, and wants the truth to come out. She's painting herself as a warm, loving human being, but the Amanda I knew was so composed, I never saw her suffering and other prisoners and staff called her the Ice Maiden."

Antoinetti said Knox "never, ever talked of Meredith or expressed emotion about her death. Whenever Meredith's face came on TV she didn't want to know and didn't respond. She was impenetrable. Underneath the veneers she remains the same controlled woman I knew well in Capanne prison. She was so composed, I never saw her suffering."

Antoinetti said that Knox "became attached to me. I opened her cell each morning and shut her in at night. She liked English music like the Beatles and always sang. She had guitar lessons, too."

Knox was "unlike any other prisoner," Antoinetti said. "I've never seen another girl like her, especially so young. She's magnetic and manipulative. She had no emotions for people, only books. She never talked to other prisoners, she was only concerned about her world. Even when they freed her after the appeal, she didn't speak to a single person she had just spent four years with, just walked out. That's not human, is it?"

And that is the question for many: Who is the real Amanda Knox?

As with the Simpson trial, the media has played a huge role in the Knox case. The U.K. papers labeled Knox "Foxy Knoxy" while the Italian papers played up Knox's sexual history and the more lurid sexual elements of the case—the assertion that the murder was a drug-fueled sex game gone wrong.

In the U.S. ABC News has been a virtual PR firm for Knox, devoting hours of time on both 20/20 and Good Morning America as well as the actual ABC Nightly News promoting Knox's innocence. Diane Sawyer did a heavily promoted hour-long interview with Knox when she was released from prison in 2011. And when the Jan. 31 conviction came in, on her ABC Nightly News broadcast, Sawyer led with "the American girl" Amanda Knox—even though Knox is 26. A full six minutes of broadcast time was devoted to Knox—including video of her singing and playing guitar. When has a national news network treated a twice-convicted murderer in such a manner?

The two media portraits of Knox—the sex-obsessed sexual manipulator she's been portrayed as being by the European media and the pristine girl-next-door innocent-abroad the U.S. media has presented conflict, obviously. But what has been lost in the emphasis on Knox as the victim of the story is the actual murder victim, Meredith Kercher.

There's no question sexism and misogyny have played a major role in the case. Were Knox not young and beautiful, it's unlikely there would be as much fascination with her. There is also the American-centric position that only American courts could give a defendant a fair trial—even though the Italian process is not only much like that of the U.S., but offers a defendant a two-tiered chance at redemption, both of which Knox's case failed. Twice.

Imagine if Knox had been brought to trial in the U.S. —accused of the sex-torture murder of a young woman of color (Kercher's mother is Indian) yet accusing a black man of the crime and alleging she was there when he murdered the victim.

Do we think the U.S. media would be as kind to Knox under those circumstances, or would she be a reviled perpetrator like Susan Smith, pretending a black man had kidnapped her two children when in fact she had driven them to their deaths herself?

Would Knox have been given a \$4 million advance to write her prison memoir—or would that have fallen under the "can't profit from a crime" dictate in the U.S.?

The Knox case is all about what we perceive as "other." In this case the villain is the Italian justice system which has to be wrong, because Knox is young and pretty and most importantly, American. And the victim is, in U.K. and European parlance, black.

In none of the media blitz surrounding Knox as victim in the U.S. has the real victim, Kercher, been a part of the story. Her bruised and cut, torn and slashed body has not been discussed. Instead we have seen Knox, her blue eyes staring into the middle distance, her dark blonde hair falling over her eyes as she plays guitar or sits at a computer writing (she's pursuing a degree in creative writing).

There are no photos or video of Kercher, always smiling or laughing, her dark hair thrown back or falling around her shoulders. There are no photos of her very dark-skinned mother, weeping. Or her anguished journalist father, who wrote a book himself about her and the case.

Why are we so invested in Knox being innocent? Is it the perception that Americans are never guilty? Is it her good looks? Is it her "normal" background, while Guede has been portrayed in American media as a "drifter" (he wasn't)?

Why doesn't the American media ever mentioned what Knox did to Patrick Lumumba? Or that the Italian police also charged her with two false and slanderous claims against police—garnering six-year terms in prison each?

On Feb. 6 acclaimed British director Michael Winterbottom released a clip of his soon-to-be-released film based on the Knox case. Winterbottom bought the rights to American journalist Barbie Latza Nadeau's book *Angel Face: Sex, Murder, and the Inside Story of Amanda Knox*. Winterbottom asserts his film just uses the case as a foundation for a different story, but the clip looks just like Knox.

There are no answers in the Knox case, just as there weren't in the O.J. Simpson trial. A young woman is still dead, another convicted at two separate trials of her murder.

But what is clear, is that the media has not served justice well. American media has completely ignored facts of the case—and Knox's indictment of Lumumba—and Kercher has been lost entirely in the emphasis on Knox as victim.

There's no question sexism has played a major role in this case. What has been ignored, however, is how large a role racism has played—from the ignoring of Knox indicting a black man to the ignoring of the victim, herself a woman of color.

We may never know what happened on the night of November 1, 2007. But what we do know is that when young, attractive women come before the criminal justice system, they are treated differently from men. To the detriment of all—most especially the victims.

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