

Miscarriages of justice in the age of social media: the Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito innocence campaign

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The role of the media in exposing miscarriages of justice has not been extensively researched and even less is known about the contribution of the Internet and social media. Drawing on in-depth interviews with innocence campaigners, this article examines the social media campaign to overturn the conviction of Amanda Knox and her co-accused Raffaele Sollecito for the murder of the Meredith Kercher in Perugia in 2007. It explores the campaigners' use of different media platforms. It also examines their motivations in joining and supporting the campaign and discusses the campaign's contributions and social dynamics. Finally, it elucidates the factors that shaped supporters' belief in the innocence of Knox and Sollecito.

Keywords: wrongful conviction, Internet, media, pressure groups, qualitative research method

Introduction

Media outlets are often instrumental in raising public awareness of miscarriages of justice, providing campaigners with a platform to protest the innocence of the wrongly convicted. Nevertheless, the role of the media in exposing miscarriages of justice has not been extensively researched (Savage, Grieve and Poyser 2007). Even less is known about the contribution of the Internet and social media, despite their potential as a low-threshold means of mobilising individuals against a perceived miscarriage of justice. The Internet has facilitated a significant expansion of the 'repertoire of collective action' (Tilly 1984) for protest movements more generally. As well as boosting existing mechanisms of resistance, the Internet has stimulated the

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creation of new tools, significantly increasing the scale and speed of mobilisation (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2009; Lievrouw 2014). 'Collective action' is increasingly giving way to digitally assisted 'connective action' (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Moreover, the Internet has also been a prominent factor in the rise of 'participatory civics' (Zuckerman 2014), a type of activism that is driven by a desire to impact on single causes through digital media rather than to commit to broadly drawn conventional political movements (Bennett 2012).

In addition to enhanced mobilisation and recruitment opportunities, social media platforms offer miscarriage of justice campaigners their own discursive space for challenging the decisions taken by the criminal justice system but also, crucially, for contesting dominant media interpretations of a particular crime, effectively providing the wider public with competing accounts of innocence and guilt. Indeed, the conventional mass media may be an important ally in raising awareness that a miscarriage of justice has occurred, but if the initial coverage is such as to amount to trial by media, it could be easily seen as a contributory factor in allowing justice to miscarry in the first place (Savage, Grieve and Poyser 2007; Greer and McLaughlin 2012a). The social media sphere holds out the promise of a new type of public engagement with criminal justice, facilitated by citizen journalists, bloggers and other types of commentators who operate outside the conventional mould of professional, institutionalized journalism. In the words of one author, 'web sites do offer a model of critical thinking that gives the public another layer of discourse through which it may speak its mind' (Grochowski 2006: 374). 'Disintermediation' (Couldry 2008), 'self-mediation' (Cammaerts 2012) and 'mass self-communication' (Castells 2009) are some of the terminology associated with the diminishing role of conventional media in favour of ordinary media users. Thus, citizens are able to debate crime and criminal justice matters in a manner that is less reliant on established media channels than was previously the case. One of the potential consequences is that criminal justice agencies are facing the prospect of having their control over 'crime knowledge' (Grochowski 2006) challenged to a much greater extent.

This article presents a case study of a miscarriage of justice campaign with a specific focus on its online aspects. When the US exchange student Amanda Knox and her Italian co-defendant Raffaele Sollecito were convicted in 2009 of the murder of the British Erasmus student Meredith Kercher in the Italian town of Perugia, social media played a vital role in mobilising supporters to campaign against their

conviction. The innocence campaign drew support from Internet users across a variety of predominantly English-speaking countries. Founding members of the campaign were able to reach out to others online on a scale that was previously unthinkable, leading to the recruitment of more supporters who proved very dedicated to the cause but who also brought with them a level of expertise that would have been much more difficult to access otherwise.

Savage, Grieve and Poyser (2007: 85) comment in relation to miscarriage of justice campaigns that '[w]ho campaigners are, how they operate and with what effect constitute, we would argue, important questions in understanding the distribution of justice within criminal justice systems'. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with supporters, this article seeks to address these questions in respect of the Knox/Sollecito innocence campaign. Access to the field was negotiated with representatives from the campaign. After some internal deliberation, they agreed to publicise the research on their social media platforms. Nine individuals came forward and were interviewed on Skype (seven) and face-to-face (two). The sample consisted of seven men and two women: the reason for the under-representation of women will be explored in this paper. The interviewees were based in the UK (four), Italy (two) and the US (three). Semi-structured interviews were chosen for two main reasons. First, interviewing appeared the most suitable method in light of the explorative nature of the project involving a little researched topic. Asking open-ended questions around a number of loosely defined themes offered the best chance of shining a light on aspects of the innocence campaign that could not be mapped out in detail beforehand. Second, with innocence campaigners rather weary of outsiders, especially strangers (as this article will explain), trust was a major issue in the relationship between researchers and research participants, calling for a format in which the latter felt entirely comfortable disclosing the nature of their involvement with the campaign. This could be best achieved in a setting in which research participants were able to hear and speak directly (albeit using Skype in most cases) with the researchers and felt able to challenge their line of questioning if needed.

The first section of the article sets out the context and gives an overview of key events in the Meredith Kercher murder case. The second section explains how the Knox/Sollecito case can be simultaneously considered a case of wrongful conviction and one of wrongful exoneration, something that is reflected in the sharp online divide between those who believe in the pair's innocence and those who believe in

their guilt. The third section explores how Knox and Sollecito's supporters made use of different media forms in their campaign and, drawing on online activism literature, gives a theoretical outline of the importance of the Internet in making collective action of this kind possible. The fourth section examines supporters' motivations in joining the campaign, while the fifth section discusses the campaign's contributions and social dynamics. The final section focuses on the elements that shaped supporters' belief in the innocence of Knox and Sollecito.

Context and overview of key events

The rape and brutal murder of Meredith Kercher in 2007 in the medieval town of Perugia was a major news story of global proportions, generating headlines and gripping the online world until the present day. The media focus has almost invariably been exclusively on Amanda Knox. She was dubbed 'Foxy Knoxy' by British tabloids who speculated intensely about her sex life, resulting in a narrative favouring the presumption that she was guilty. A lack of clarity regarding the circumstances in which the victim was murdered and the gruesome nature of the crime no doubt added an element of mystery to the case: one of our interviewees characterised what was written about the case as a 'Gothic novel', fuelling a steady stream of media reporting that was also in no small part driven by an intense interest in Knox's persona (Simkin 2013).

Rudy Guede, an Ivory Coast national and long-term resident in Italy, was the first to be convicted of Meredith Kercher's murder in 2008. Having implicated Knox and Sollecito in the crime, his sentence was reduced on appeal from 30 to 16 years. Knox and Sollecito, who were in a relationship with each other at the time of the murder, were convicted at a second trial: in December 2009, they were sentenced to 26 years and 25 years respectively. They were released on appeal in October 2011 but this decision was overturned by the Court of Cassation in March 2013, dramatic developments that sparked renewed media interest. In January 2014, the guilty verdicts against Knox and Sollecito were reinstated, with Knox being convicted in absentia. Their convictions once again went before the Court of Cassation which delivered its final verdict in March 2015, when it exonerated both defendants, generating a further spike in media interest.

This study initially identified two online forums that were of potential interest: Perugia Murder File (PMF) and Injustice in Perugia (IIP). While there were (and still are) many more websites devoted to the Kercher murder case, including groups on Twitter and Facebook, and a much disputed entry on Wikipedia, PMF and IIP represent the websites that rapidly established themselves as two camps with diametrically opposed views. PMF posters believed that Knox and Sollecito were guilty as charged and they predominantly engaged in producing discourse to this effect; IIP posters, on the other hand, saw them as victims of a miscarriage of justice and campaigned for their release. The two communities referred to each other through the pejorative terms of ‘guilters’ and ‘innocentisti’. Unsurprisingly, online exchanges between two online communities have tended to be very hostile.

Internal divisions led to the decline of the PMF community. Another website, Truejustice.org, became the principal public platform for pro-guilt arguments and is continuing to argue the case to the present day. The IIP community remained still active online, but having (provisionally) reached the goal of its campaign with the release of Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito, the website was renamed Injustice Anywhere. At the time of the interviews, campaigning had widened to other miscarriages of justice,- a move that is not uncommon for ad hoc campaigning groups (Savage, Grieve and Poyser 2007) -, but the January 2014 retrial reinstating the guilty verdict resulted in a refocusing on the Knox/Sollecito case. The semi-structured interviews for this article were conducted in the autumn of 2012, approximately a year after Knox and Sollecito were released from prison and six months before the Court of Cassation overturned their successful appeal, triggering a retrial.

Miscarriages of justice campaigns

Miscarriages of justice campaigns fall into two main categories. Wrongful conviction campaigns are founded on the belief that a person was convicted of a crime that he or she did not commit, resulting in a movement to have the conviction overturned on appeal. The second category is focused on the notion that the criminal justice system has wronged the victim by failing to bring the perpetrators to justice, for example, by failing to properly investigate a crime or prosecute offenders (Savage, Grieve and Poyser 2007). A subspecies of the second category involves wrongful exoneration campaigns where there is a strong public belief that an individual was acquitted for a

crime he or she did commit. These cases often receive their impetus from media coverage promoting a narrative of guilt that is at odds with the procedural-legal outcome of a trial declaring the defendant not guilty. It is, in other words, a case of trial by media versus trial by law (Battaglia 2012). Such cases can subsequently give rise to active campaigning on behalf of victims to bring the perpetrators to justice. One of the most famous examples in English legal history is that of the murdered black teenager Stephen Lawrence. His killers were initially acquitted but they were convicted at a second trial following a lengthy campaign leading to a change in the law (Savage 2007; Naughton 2013).

Interestingly, as the Knox/Sollecito case demonstrates, a case proceeding through the court system from the original trial up to an appeal, a retrial and a further appeal can simultaneously be considered a wrongful conviction and a wrongful exoneration, albeit by groups with very different readings of the crime. Especially at the later stages of the case, the fact that Knox's and Sollecito's original convictions were reinstated and the prospect that they might go back to prison meant that to innocence supporters the drama of their wrongful conviction was continuing following a brief respite. However, for those who remain convinced that Knox and Sollecito are guilty, most prominently the victim's family and their supporters, the fact that the pair were exonerated in March 2015 following two previous guilty verdicts makes this a case of the victim being denied justice. Moreover, the circumstances of this particular crime are such that the final verdict is unlikely to dissuade so-called guilters that Knox and Sollecito are guilty.

In part, it is because of the strong presumption in favour of guilt created by sections of the European media that doubt may continue to linger. Moreover, the sharp online divide between narratives of guilt and innocence also means that the issue will probably remain unresolved: the process whereby the media adjust their story in deference to the official judicial verdict and toe the line to mirror the proclaimed legal truth (Nobles and Schiff 2000), shifting their stance from guilt to innocence or vice versa as required, is unlikely to be replicated in social media where different versions of the truth about the Kercher murder are likely to continue to be freely available and clash with each other. As one interviewee explained, this alone was sufficient reason to continue campaigning:

You'd hope that people would just say: 'they're innocent that's fine, let them get on with their lives', but people are still saying: 'they're guilty, they got off

on a technicality' and this kind of stuff and (...) you never know who's out there and reading this stuff and it just has to be challenged.'

The media perspective on miscarriages of justice is quite different from that of the criminal justice system itself, as Nobles and Schiff (2000) have demonstrated in relation to English criminal cases, generating a degree of confusion as to what precisely is a miscarriage of justice (Naughton 2013). The way in which the media tend to interpret an initial guilty verdict is at variance with the way in which guilt is constructed in the judicial sphere where a guilty outcome always comes with the assumption that the defendant received a fair trial. The media will often omit the procedural fairness aspect of a guilty verdict from the reporting (this being taken as a given), treating the legal outcome as a statement of absolute guilt. If subsequently the guilty verdict is overturned on appeal, the media will interpret this as a sign that the defendant was innocent all along, rather than adhering to the legal perspective that a successful appeal merely signals that the initial trial was procedurally flawed, without this being a reflection of the defendant's factual innocence or guilt.

Innocence campaigners too tend to be motivated by a steadfast belief that the defendant is innocent: they campaign against a conviction on the basis of innocence and not just on the basis that there has been a lack of a fair trial or because of procedural flaws affecting an otherwise guilty defendant (Jenkins 2013). So too did the innocence campaigners in the Knox/Sollecito case display a strong belief that the two co-defendants were innocent, but they also prominently leaned on flaws in the forensic investigation and at the first trial in arguing their case. The discourse they produced in various social media can therefore be distinguished from mainstream media discourse which typically glosses over procedural safeguards. According to their supporters, Knox and Sollecito were found guilty because they did not get a fair trial but these claims came with an unshakable belief that they were most definitely innocent.

Being (in) the media and digital activism

Conventional news media can help to advance a campaign against a miscarriage of justice in three main ways: by giving publicity to the cause, by facilitating access to influential players who could make a material difference to the outcome (e.g. specialist lawyers) and by using their own power to investigate to expose the flaws in

the original trial or process (Savage, Grieve and Poyser 2007). In the new media era, the mediating role of the established news media may have become less prominent, but it has not disappeared. With miscarriage of justice campaigns often starting out as single-issue ad-hoc pressure groups, they, like many other movements, are likely to continue to look to the mainstream media to draw attention to their cause but they also increasingly resort to self-mediation by capitalising on the affordances of new technologies to simply 'be the media'. Protest movements are, in other words, making full use of the 'media opportunity structure' (Cammaerts 2012) available to them. Thus, '[t]he internet provides them with extensive mediation opportunities to inform independently, to debate internally, to link up directly with those interested in their cause in a cost-efficient way, potentially across the time-space continuum' (Cammaerts 2012: 125).

The idea of 'disintermediation' offers similar insights into ways in which the intermediary role of the mass media is being eroded resulting in a redistribution of communicative power in favour of ordinary users and citizens. Couldry (2008: 386) talks of a 'correction' in respect of 'the hidden injuries of media power' in which there is now a possibility 'to distribute more widely the capacity to tell important stories about oneself'. The emergence of citizen-journalism is testimony to the capacity of new media technologies to turn everyone into an information provider and a public commentator. Whether the citizen-journalist has the same ability to generate publicity or set the news agenda as a professional journalist does is a moot point. Chouliaraki (2013) talks of 're-mediation' to focus attention on the interface between citizen-journalism and major news outlets which are still relied on to amplify the voices emerging through social media platforms. On this interpretation, conventional news media remain the linchpin of media publicity, with 'convergent journalism' representing the coming together of old and new media power². Tufekci (2013: 852) notes that: '[w]ith the emergence of alternative means of attention acquisition, movements still need mass media, which are still the biggest conveyor of public attention, but this relationship is less that of an oligarchy to a desperate customer'.

² For an example of the potential input of citizen-journalism in campaigns against miscarriages of justice see Greer and McLoughlin (2012b).

A principal feature of digital activism is that it is powered by the possibility of personal expression and the sharing of individual ideas on a large scale (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 742). Interviewees from the innocence campaign indicated that they were very keen to write about the case and disseminate their analysis through a variety of media. Indeed, the possibility of self-mediation or what Castells (2009) terms ‘mass self-communication’ represented a very rewarding aspect of their involvement. Writing, blogging, commenting, conversing with others, along with the intellectual challenge of trying to make sense of the case, were activities interviewees clearly relished. One person repeated several times during the interview: ‘I like the sight of my own written word’. What at first glance appears a rather self-centred statement actually underlines that sharing ideas with others online and being able to express oneself creatively is an important motivation for becoming involved in a particular cause. Bearing this out was another interviewee who characterised his campaigning as a ‘hobby’; a third person referred to it as ‘a major pastime’, while a fourth one called it an ‘eccentricity’. In the words of yet another interviewee: ‘we, for lack of a better term, I think, we enjoyed our involvement in this, you know, it was fulfilling to us’.

As campaigners, they approached the case very differently from the passive supporter or ‘slactivist’ (Zuckerman 2014) whose involvement is limited to signing a petition, donating money or liking something on Facebook. Indeed, interviewees were self-conscious about the extent of their involvement, expressing surprise that they had found the case far more absorbing than they could have anticipated but also struggling to explain what made the case so very appealing. One said: ‘was I maybe obsessed with this particular case? And the answer is maybe I was a little bit.’ Interviewees talked of foregoing lunch breaks and other offline social activities in order to immerse themselves in the minute details of the forensic and legal evidence. Social media platforms, creating a network of outlets for sharing ideas and participating in seemingly unlimited conversation, were facilitating a volume of discussion which would be comparatively much harder to achieve in the traditional media landscape. Campaigners were quite obviously ‘being the media’.

However, they also aimed to ‘be in the media’ in the sense of targeting the conventional news media in an attempt to influence the coverage. Making media appearances, giving interviews, publishing in the local press and responding to the coverage by posting readers’ comments on major news websites represented different

ways in which the innocence campaign sought to promote its message, evidence of a ‘partial adaption to the media logic’ (Cammaerts 2012: 124). One of the tactics was to strike up a relationship with individual journalists to persuade them to change their pro-guilt narrative to a pro-innocence stance. As one interviewee put it, such valiant attempts did not necessarily stop journalists from ‘backing two horses’, meaning that they were reluctant to throw their full weight behind the innocence campaign in case the judicial process proved them wrong. Media relations were clearly considered to be a valuable facet of the campaign which counted a few influential US journalists among its supporters. On the other hand, interviewees consistently expressed profound dissatisfaction with the news coverage, in particular, they felt that the British press was strongly biased against Knox and Sollecito. In other words, mainstream media were regarded as an indispensable ally in the campaign but a number of established media outlets were also profoundly distrusted³.

On yet another level, the campaign demonstrates the capacity of new media to change not just the relationship between movements and the conventional mass media but the nature of movements themselves, showing an entirely new dynamics at work in the way in which people mobilise. Obviously, it is important not to fall into the trap of digital determinism and to be aware of the fact that the effect of new technologies is to a large extent in the manner of their usage rather than in technological capability alone (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005: 384). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) draw a distinction between ‘collective action’ associated with social movements before the advent of new media and ‘connective action’ characterising mobilisation in the digital age. Whereas collective action involves organisations providing the structure and narrative that is needed for the emergence of a collective identity, connective action sees ‘formal organizations (...) losing their grip on individuals, and group ties (...) being replaced by large-scale, fluid networks’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 748). A key driver which has been making it progressively easier for individuals to mobilise without the support of conventional organisations is the Internet which has itself become an ‘organizing agent’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 752). Scaling up

³ See for example the following analysis by one US-based interviewee: ‘[T]he reporting in the *Independent* and the *Guardian* was very good (...). The BBC was very disappointing. The *Telegraph* was pretty disappointing in many ways and the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Mail* and most of the tabloids were just dreadful. Just awful’.

typically is quick and easy thanks to new media, with global reach no longer the exception.

The resulting formations are in many ways unstable; some are ephemeral in the style of ‘flash mobs’ which disperse as quickly as they form (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005). Fluidity and weak social ties are a defining feature but, equally, ad hoc groups may become more permanent by adopting some of the characteristics of more formal organisations, such as international differentiation processes creating a more hierarchical structure (Dolata and Schrape 2015). In other words, connective action does not rule out adopting features more commonly associated with collective action. Another characteristic of connective action already discussed above is its expressive style, with social media facilitating personal interventions but also satisfying the need that such interventions should have direct impact (Zuckerman 2014). Connective action favours causes that are not necessarily ideological or political in a traditional sense, sometimes bringing about surprising alliances.

All of these features apply to a varying degree to the miscarriage of campaign under consideration here. For example, one interviewee called the innocence group’s key Facebook page ‘our clubhouse’, a direct echo of Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012: 753) observation that the Internet has become the ‘organizing agent’ and provides the key infrastructure for a successful mobilisation, obviating the need for ‘a club, a party, or a shared ideological frame’ (ibid, p. 753). The case study presented here shows how important it is to try to understand and conceptualise contemporary miscarriages of justice campaigns in a way that is cognisant of the fundamental shifts brought about by the digital age.

Innocence campaigners’ motivations

None of individuals we spoke with knew either Knox or Sollecito personally when they became involved in the campaign against their conviction. Neither did they belong to any of the usual stakeholders or organisations who take on such cases, for example, politicians, human rights and civil liberties organisations and other campaigning groups, confirming the idea of connective action facilitating mobilisation outside of established organisational frameworks. What motivated them to campaign so intensely for the release of two complete strangers? While interviewees each followed very different trajectories, there are two striking

similarities. Firstly, their initial interest was triggered by a combination of widespread coverage in mainstream mass media and a personal identification or affinity with an aspect of the case, serving as an illustration of a digital activism based on personal appeal (Bennett 2012). It was not the cause of wrongful conviction per se, but the individuals caught up in the case who were the immediate reason for mobilising. Secondly, having researched the case further on the Internet, interviewees became convinced that a grave miscarriage of justice had occurred, which motivated them to campaign on behalf of Knox and Sollecito. One of the campaigners reflects on how he became involved:

Right, OK, so why did I get involved? I got involved because (...) initially two reasons. One was that I had visited Perugia just before (...) the case happened. I was there in August at a meeting, so I knew Perugia (...) Took no direct involvement, I just picked up the media like everybody else did. Didn't really latch on to that there was something wrong particularly, partly because you just assume that (...) a legal system would work properly and they'd get spat out at the other end either guilty or innocent. (...) By the time of the (...) result of the first trial, I was following it more closely. It had somehow, there's a Yiddish word called 'kishka', which is stomach, which is 'it got me in the kishka', but it's much more than just that. OK. (...) There was, something was bothering me, something was making me feel more than just...anyway, she was, they were, declared guilty. So I then started searching the Internet, and mainly I just Googled Amanda Knox, and every time you Googled Amanda Knox, vast amount of stuff (...) and I spent my lunchtimes munching a sandwich in my office and Googling Amanda Knox. And gradually I found (...) the Injustice in Perugia site, I'm not quite certain how I found it but I did.

This case struck a cord because, for example, campaigners had been to Perugia or were in Italy at the time of the first trial, or they were from Seattle, Knox's hometown, and were vaguely acquainted with the family, creating a more direct affinity with the case. One interviewee said that one of the principal reasons for being involved was a desire to combat ignorance and media-driven prejudice about the case within Knox's small local community. Being of the same generation as Knox and Sollecito was cited as a factor by our youngest interviewee (aged 34). With the exception of one individual who had been professionally involved in a previous case during his career, this case was the first ever in which interviewees had actively

campaigned. An interesting divide is that some campaigners expressed a desire to continue campaigning in other cases, while to others the Knox case had been a one-off, the reason being that the campaign had taken up so much of their time that they found it difficult to envisage that they would become involved again to such an extent in another case. This fork in the road confirms that ad hoc movements may evolve to become more established organisations, but also that this more permanent form of action may not appeal to everyone who originally mobilised.

The socialising aspect of the Internet and the fact that it enabled interviewees to discuss the case with others played an important role in turning interviewees into active participants and campaigners. As one individual put it: 'Finding some to talk to about those things through the Internet was an incentive ultimately sparking my interest in them and also then deepening and extending the discussion to other cases of this kind of which there are many'. Another one said: 'I think it's a healthy democratic thing to be doing, and I think the Internet is a wonderful new avenue for us all to become more rational and more reasonable and able to discuss things healthily'. Such comments project an image of social media as the digital equivalent of the old 19th century European coffee houses where citizens gathered to engage in rational discussion of issues of public concern (Habermas 1989; Papacharissi 2004; Rasmussen 2014). However, this overtly rational approach was also underpinned by personal and emotional motivations: memories of an injustice that had befallen their ancestors, for example, as in the case of one individual who had lost relatives in the Holocaust or another one with genealogical ties to witch trials which had made them more sensitive to injustice and gave them a moral incentive to act.

It is worth noting that the innocence campaign predominantly appeared to attract supporters over the age of 40. Our findings suggest that the supporters were mainly male, but this was strongly refuted by interviewees who said that while men had a higher profile in the online campaign, an equal number of women were involved. They said that women tended to be less visible, providing support behind the scenes. According to one interviewee: 'it's more a male thing to get involved in childish online arguments, I don't think the women go for that quite as much'. Asked why women were less visible, the fear of becoming a victim of Internet trolling was cited as a principal deterrent. Our two female interviewees supported this: while one had gone to great lengths to stay completely anonymous throughout, the other one had been 'outed' by pro-guilters on their principal website where she had been the target

of abusive comments. The confrontational aspects of online disagreements with pro-guilt posters also appeared to have played a role:

The guys were (...) jousting and sword-fighting; you know all this verbal jousting and verbal sword-fighting and they could be quite brutal and I found it to be very exhausting and negative and [it] made me feel sick to my stomach.

These observations chime with research documenting how women are comparatively more likely to shy away from conflict in online environments and are less likely to confront trolls (Fichman and Sanfilippo 2015). It should be noted that this potentially inhibiting effect on women's participation stands in marked contrast with the prominent role female campaigners (often female relatives of the victim) usually tend to play in miscarriage of justice campaigns in which "women's voices" (...) appear to be louder than men's' (Charman and Savage 2009: 912).

Campaigners' contributions and social dynamics

Did campaigners believe that they made a material difference to the outcome of the case? Did they feel that they somehow influenced the appeal? This is an important question, as in the new world of digitally enabled participatory civics, there is 'an interest – perhaps a need- for participants to see their impact on the issues they are trying to influence' (Zuckerman 2014: 156). In terms of desired outcomes, the campaign had an 'instrumental' character as it was aimed at a very clear target: the exoneration of Knox and Sollecito. However, it would be wrong to say that this was the only aim. 'Voice', the ability to express concern or dissatisfaction (Zuckerman 2014), in this instance with the treatment of the defendants by the media and the Italian criminal justice system, was also a clear end in itself. None of our interviewees went so far as to claim that their campaign had a significant, direct impact, although one speculated that the international dimension of the campaign, driven by the fact that Knox was a US citizen, mattered greatly in ratcheting up the pressure on the Italian criminal justice system. To quote another supporter: 'I think on balance we were probably helpful, but I don't want to overstate that and I certainly can't measure it'. Another one speculated that one of the metaphors he had come up with to describe flaws in the DNA analysis (involving 'cranking up' the equipment with which DNA was measured by the Italian authorities) was later used by the defence during the

appeal. However, even he modestly described the contribution the group made as predominantly consisting of moral and material support.

The moral support took the form of writing to and in some instances corresponding with the two defendants in prison (and in some cases writing to the Knox family). One interviewee expressed the hope that Knox and Sollecito would have found solace on their release in the online discussions:

At least have the comfort of knowing that there was a contingent of people who were prepared to address this in an intellectually honest kind of way, that, that appealed to me, that, kind of educative aspect really appealed to me.

A few supporters were also present at several stages of the legal proceedings in Perugia, an expression of solidarity with the defendants and their families but also of a wish to bear witness.

As noted already, giving media interviews, publishing and providing a corrective to erroneous online content (for example, on Google and Wikipedia) constituted another contribution which sits at the ‘voice’ end of the spectrum. Strikingly, all interviewees (with the exception of one) initially posted anonymously or used pseudonyms on social media but they eventually no longer concealed their identity: a few built up a media profile using their real identity. Hiding behind Internet anonymity was denounced by the community as cowardly and suspect, and it was a practice they associated with Internet trolls in the pro-guilt group. Using one’s real name, by contrast, was seen as making a post more honest and more authoritative. However, not everyone felt able to reveal their true identity online (one prominent supporter was said to have lost his job while one interviewee testified that there had been an active attempt by pro-guiltyers to have him dismissed) and, as pointed out already, there may have been a significant gender divide with men being much more confident about revealing their true identity online.

Financial contributions were also cited by interviewees as a form of material support consisting, for example, of money or air mile donations. American supporters mentioned lobbying senators, ambassadors, judges and eminent journalists as an important mechanism for exerting indirect pressure on the Italian judicial authorities. However, arguably the most important achievement of campaigners was promoting the cause online and building up the innocence community. The role of gatekeepers was paramount and far-reaching, extending as far as the author of this paper and her co-investigator who were subjected to an elaborate vetting process before they were

given access to the group to conduct their research. One of the gatekeepers we interviewed defined himself as some kind of talent scout who was responsible for selecting individuals for admittance to what could be termed the ‘inner circle’, something that was confirmed by another interviewee. It transpired that some supporters were actively recruited to the cause, while others were selected on merit upon joining the publicly accessible IIP discussion board, enabling them to move from the periphery to the core of the group.

Dolata and Schrape (2015: 13) note that ‘online-centric movements and communities, too, are characterized by rather small activist cores (...) who are largely responsible for the structuring and the output, and a far greater, in terms of numbers, periphery of participants’. Similarly, the pro-innocence community was described by interviewees as consisting of concentric circles: the more trusted and valuable to the group someone was considered to be, the closer he or she would be to the inner core. The credentials needed to make transition from the periphery to the core of the support group were varied. This person explains how the attempt by someone from the pro-guilt campaign to get him dismissed from his job positively impacted on his status in the group:

This guy [X] tried to get me fired. [My employer] basically told him to piss off. Trying to fire [members of my profession] is a big deal, it’s very very difficult to do. In addition to that there was actually nothing I had done wrong, I mean, I hadn’t done any...(…) What that did was attract my name to the core supporters and at that point they considered me one of them.

Another interviewee said that one way to rise through the ‘hierarchy’ was by ‘reasoning better than others’ or ‘possessing a useful skill’, but also that ‘there may be a place in the hierarchy for the truly fanatical’, although he added he would be reluctant to accept that such individuals formed part of the innocence campaign. Although our sample was small, a striking feature was that the majority of interviewees (seven out of nine) were very highly educated, with several practising in professional fields, including academia, law and medicine, that are associated with significant levels of social capital. Despite mentioning a ‘hierarchy’ and a ‘core’, interviewees insisted that the campaign was only very loosely organised, with individuals spontaneously finding a role for themselves without being directed what to do: ‘People did what they thought they were capable of doing but nobody was organising anyone’. ‘Organized informality’ is a term from the social movement

literature which captures the fluidity and self-starting qualities of online movements, which, in line with the notion of connective action, appear perfectly capable of organizing themselves without needing any of the supporting structures of formal organisations (Dolata and Schrape 2015: 4).

Precisely because of the looseness and fluidity of the action group, it is worth considering that there was quite probably not one campaign but several simultaneous campaigns to have Knox and Sollecito exonerated. While most campaigners we spoke to appeared to know each other, there were at least three individuals who did not seem to belong to the same network. Three other individuals were mentioned by interviewees as having been first-hour supporters of the innocence cause who set up a private Facebook profile from where they were able to coordinate and expand the campaigning group. Geographically speaking, it was Knox's hometown of Seattle that was identified as the epicentre of the campaign. Interestingly, there does not appear to have been an equivalent local campaign for Sollecito, confirming that this was predominantly a US-based initiative. The role of social media and the Internet was to widen the campaign to a global level where, with the help of the group's 'talent scout', it was possible to attract individuals who possessed expertise that may not have been available locally. According to one interviewee:

[Without the Internet] it would have remained pretty much a Seattle phenomenon, I think. She would have had strong local supporters, but it wouldn't have taken off like it has, where we have, you know, supporters from Europe, supporters from Canada, supporters from many many States, that's almost impossible to conceive.

A classic theme in social movement theory is the consideration that participation is costly, giving rise to the problem of the freerider who seeks to benefit from the outcomes of collective action without actually personally investing in it (Olson 1971). New media technologies, through the sheer fact of their extraordinary accessibility, have contributed to lowering the cost of participation to such an extent that global mobilisation is much easier leading to the 'constitution of public spheres around common interests that may join people in disparate regions of the globe' (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005: 382). The Knox/Sollecito innocence campaign is a case in point, although this should not detract from the very high cost (e.g. the risk of losing their job) some core members were prepared to pay to achieve their aims.

The interview findings suggest that the campaigning group became more than just a virtual social network to at least a section of supporters, who, for example, met others offline. Nevertheless, interviewees struggled to define what kind of social entity this was. To quote one interviewee:

[the group] temporarily became a real community (...) All the supporters just liked each other for what they had done, we never got to know each other well enough to start discovering the things we didn't like about them and we only met for a weekend.

Not everyone we interviewed felt part of a 'group' or a collective campaign.

According to one interviewee who only joined late in the day:

I'm not aware of this group at all, just in terms of (...) or the idea of there being a group. They're just a bunch of people who think that Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito are plainly innocent, I'm one of those people, but I'm not sure that we're a (...) you know, they come from all over the place.

The fact that most of the interactions with fellow campaigners were conducted at a distance, coupled with a sense that they did not belong to the core and also a feeling that apart from a strong belief in the innocence of the two accused they had very little in common, explains why interviewees may have been reluctant to describe themselves as belonging to a community or a campaigning group.

Their hesitation when it came to describing their collective efforts is revealing of the loose social ties associated with online mobilisation. On the other hand, there was also talk of 'camaraderie' with people who came from very different walks of life and a strong feeling of loyalty to like-minded individuals, with some campaigners forging closer bonds away from 'the group'. In the words of one interviewee: 'It's most odd. I would never have expected to get involved in anything and suddenly have a bunch of new friends who we're in contact with every day pretty much'. The surprise expressed here chimes with the fluid nature of connective action but also gives an insight into the way in which traditional social relations may form out of transient and spatially distant interactions with strangers online. Indeed, as Dolata and Schrape (2015: 12) remind us: 'online technologies (...) do not override classical forms of *social* organizing and structuring'.

Pro-guilt opponents were undoubtedly significant in giving the innocence campaign a sense of identity based on agonistic principles according to which a clearly defined us/them divide enables groups and movements to forge a sense of 'us'

through a common enemy (Mouffe 2000). Interviewees gave several examples of how innocence campaigners had been targeted by the pro-guilt group, but there was also some suggestion that they had retaliated, although the exact details remained vague. The rivalry with the pro-guilters was very intense and reached an apotheosis on Wikipedia, requiring a personal intervention by the website's founder Jimmy Wales (Preston 2013). The conflict centred around the Wikipedia page about the murder of Meredith Kercher where innocence and guilt campaigners did battle with each other by repeatedly trying to edit the entry so that it would reflect their perspective on the crime. The page was locked down for a period of time and Wikipedia took action against individual posters: one of the people we interviewed remained banned from posting on the website, despite repeated requests directly addressed to Wales to lift the ban. The individual in question said that he was unhappy with the account of the case on Wikipedia, arguing that it was slanted in favour of the guilters' narrative. The information on Wikipedia mattered greatly to innocence supporters, with one calling the website 'the greatest invention of our time'. Having their account of the crime accepted by what one could term 'the court of Wikipedia' was perhaps as much a validation as winning the appeal against the conviction in a court of law. This side of the campaign is a good example of what Lievrouw (2014) terms 'commons knowledge projects' which involve challenging established and dominant narratives by reconfiguring and reordering available information, typically but not exclusively on Wikipedia.

Believing in innocence

How could supporters be certain that Knox and Sollecito were innocent? They indicated that they had researched the case extensively online (one was able to say exactly how many hours he had researched the case before making up his mind) and they referred to their discussions with others on social media which had allowed them to establish the innocence of the accused. They knew the pair to be innocent because they had arrived at this conclusion using their own critical faculties. Interviewees compared themselves to jury members at a trial who base their judgement purely on the evidence before them. However, one may question to what extent their verdict is genuinely akin to the decision of a jury hearing evidence from both the prosecution and the defence side in a court setting that is tightly controlled by procedural law.

This is not to say that their conclusions were not valid but merely to draw attention to the fact that these were arrived at by a group of like-minded individuals, who, as already noted, displayed some insular features. One of the acknowledged drawbacks of the digital public sphere is that it has a tendency to splinter into isolationist pockets where information defying strongly held beliefs is easily blocked out. Rasmussen (2014: 1323) notes that '[w]hen contrary or conflicting positions rarely get the possibility to meet and challenge one another, they tend to develop more extreme views and develop further distance from one another'.

Although it was acknowledged that online information was not automatically trustworthy, the amount of information freely available on the Internet was identified by one interviewee as a great leveller, giving everyone the chance to assess the evidence:

What staggered me is how much information there is on the Internet (...) being able to access raw material, raw photographs and evidence and so forth, that really does make it interesting to me, to see how much is possible. (...). Before TV the best you could do is form a queue at the Old Bailey and hopefully get in to see a case, maybe thirty or forty people might be able to see something. Now there's no limit to the number of people who can review a photograph or a witness statement if they are in the public domain.

Campaigners also deferred to the knowledge and expertise of trusted core members. For example, repeated reference was made to a former FBI agent who was involved with the innocence campaign and had extensively written about the case. For all the informality and non-hierarchical aspects of the campaign, the authority of core members mattered in building a shared and unshakable belief in innocence.

As discussed above, there is still a potentially significant gap between the belief that a person's conviction is unsafe and the belief that he or she is innocent of the crime. Successful appeals are mere rulings about the fairness of legal proceedings but they do not necessarily establish the innocence or guilt of the accused, a distinction that is all too easily lost in media discourse in which a quashed conviction is often conflated with innocence (Nobles and Schiff 2000). Considering that they did not know her personally, at least not at first, character was a surprisingly prominent, if perhaps again somewhat questionable, factor in supporters' belief that Knox was innocent.

The initial prosecution case that the accused had taken part in a sex game gone wrong in which the sexually deviant Knox had been the main instigator was dismissed as completely incredible because, interviewees argued, women very rarely take the lead in sexually motivated crime⁴. Once again, the issue had been extensively researched online by supporters. It was claimed that where women had been involved in similar cases, they were mere accessories who found themselves taking part because they were either coerced or manipulated by their male partners. Such gender scripts form the staple diet of popular narratives about women who kill (O’Sullivan 2008; Jewkes 2010; Seal 2010), running the gamut from women who are seen as sexually submissive to women who are seen as hypersexual. While tabloid discourse was leaning to the latter, several innocence campaigners we interviewed were convinced that women were incapable of committing the sort of crime that occurred in the Kercher murder because of their gender. Knox was, in their view, a wholesome ‘college kid’ who may not have been perfect (there was acknowledgement of her use of soft drugs) but who was nevertheless a ‘nice’ young woman who was simply incapable of committing the kind of crime the prosecution alleged to have taken place. To quote one interviewee: ‘Amanda was like Meredith, you know, she was a good girl, came from a good family, she was a good student and she called her parents regularly’. These explanations rehearse well-established gender scripts but they also show how support for the suspects very much hinged on their personalities and a belief that they were ‘good’ people rather than on a more general belief that everyone is entitled to a fair trial, regardless of how likeable they are as individuals. Whatever one’s views on the theories expounded in supporters’ narratives, their observations, in some cases based on countless hours of Internet research, first and foremost

⁴ Interestingly, however, one interviewee categorically rejected the notion that some suspects can be ruled out a priori: ‘I can’t look at them [Knox and Sollecito] and say ‘Oh well, look, they’re very nice people.’ I do know people who’ve done that and say ‘they’re perfectly nice’, but that doesn’t stop them being murderers, murderers come in all shapes and sizes and they could be murderers, but I don’t think they are, but not based on looking at photographs. I don’t know these people, I’ve never met them, and I’ve never spoken to them, but even if I had met them, seen them or spoken to them, I still wouldn’t be qualified to tell whether they were murderers or not. Lots of murderers live completely normal lives, and don’t attract suspicion to themselves at all, they’re very frequently people who others would say ‘Oh, they wouldn’t hurt a fly’’.’

underscore the intensity of their preoccupation and their strong personal affinity with the case.

A similar intensity was reserved for the prosecutor who was severely criticised and was the focus of some very raw anger. There was much speculation that his character was flawed to the point of being pathological. His record of previous unsafe convictions represented a central aspect of supporters' belief that Knox and Sollecito were innocent. The police and the forensic team were similarly criticised for their role, albeit in a less personal manner, with allegations of police coercion against Knox and negligent handling of DNA evidence extensively discussed and dissected on pro-innocence social media platforms (Gies and Bortoluzzi 2014). However, rather than concluding that no one would ever know the truth about the murder, including the truth about Knox's and Sollecito's involvement, the actions and omissions of the police and forensic team cemented campaigners' belief that the pair were absolutely innocent. Interviewees were convinced that Rudy Guede alone committed the murder. While they signalled that they had a clear idea of why and how he committed the crime and had their suspicions about his role in framing Knox and Sollecito for the murder, they also expressed compassion for him. Interviewees were keen to refute any suggestion that their belief that Guede acted alone was in any way motivated by race or rested on the notion that his race was a decisive factor. Similarly, the US-based supporters denied that their criticism of the Italian authorities was in any way 'anti-Italian' or xenophobic. They were at pains to point out the positive aspects of the Italian legal system and they offset their criticism with criticism of US criminal justice, for example, acknowledging that wrongful convictions are all too common in the US, with tragic consequences if the death penalty is imposed.

Conclusion

For reasons of access, this study had to rely on a small, self-selected sample of individuals whose willingness to participate in the research was a further manifestation of their dedication to the innocence campaign. The customary advice that further research is needed applies here, especially if we are to arrive at a better understanding of the extent and significance of online campaigning in miscarriage of justice cases. Nevertheless, the findings from this research demonstrate how social media were used effectively by a small group of very dedicated activists engaging in a

type of digital activism known as connective action. With the media traditionally playing a key role in miscarriage of justice campaigning, the research highlights the continuing importance of the established mass media, but it also shows how campaigners are using new media technologies to be their own media. Furthermore, the manner of campaigning is closely entwined with inherent technological capabilities and the way in which these are being used. Motivated by a strong personal identification with the suspects, the supporters in the Knox/Sollecito case went to considerable lengths to hold the Italian criminal justice system up to a level of scrutiny that would have been unthinkable before the advent of social media. The tools available online made it possible for them to network and recruit on an international scale, to fundraise, to study the crime and its forensics in minute detail as a collective and to build capacity. The social media sphere afforded them the space to challenge the crime knowledge promoted by criminal justice agencies, the established news media and the pro-guilt movement.

Campaigners in the Knox/Sollecito case utilised social media to participate in a movement with no a clear hierarchy or leadership but with a concentric structure reflecting differing levels of involvement and expertise. However, the sense of empowerment articulated by interviewees was offset by a gender divide which meant that women appeared extraordinarily reluctant to play a very visible role in the campaign, apparently for fear of becoming a target of trolling and deterred by the hostile exchanges on social media. The Internet's unedifying side was amply revealed in the reactions this case provoked: it is no coincidence that one author has called the online anti-Knox campaign 'trial by fury' (Preston 2013). While this accusation was predominantly aimed at the pro-guilt group, innocence campaigners were also implicated in the ferocious online battle, with the cascade of claims and counter-claims on Wikipedia constituting a prime example.

One recurring feature of the interviews was trenchant criticism of both criminal justice agencies and the established news media. The latter were criticised for their factually incorrect, biased and superficial reporting, spurring campaigners on to tackle the misreporting by publishing correctives online, albeit that some of the painstakingly detailed discussions taking place on discussion boards would probably only have found their way to a niche audience. The interview findings suggest that the campaign was accompanied by a high degree of disintermediation or self-mediation, with supporters preferring to be their own media wherever possible. Nevertheless,

despite their misgivings about the news media, there can be no doubt that supporters tried to make full use of the media opportunity structure available to them, including established news outlets, and wanted to appear in the main news outlets to impact on the coverage. Monitoring, discussing and engaging with the way in which the case was reported in the news media were an integral part of the campaign.

Considering that the aim ultimately was the exoneration of Knox and Sollecito, the campaign did achieve what it set out to achieve, although procedural twists and turns prolonged the road to victory substantially. None of the interviewees claimed that the campaign had a direct impact on the judicial process. It should be noted that success in relation to miscarriage of justice campaigns can be measured in several ways and it often exceeds the immediate goal of overturning a conviction (Savage, Grieve and Poyser 2007). Getting the story out that Knox and Sollecito were innocent, -in other words, voice-, was arguably the campaign's most important aim. Taking account of the fact that the online discussion was predominantly conducted in English for the benefit of English-speaking parts of the world, the immediate target was not the Italian courtroom but wider public opinion which needed to be persuaded that there was an alternative and more credible version of the truth about the Kercher murder. This explains, for example, the bitter battle over Wikipedia as an influential general knowledge forum. The question that arises is whether the social media sphere which was so instrumental in this campaign may prove something of an Achilles' heel in the long term as it is also the place where the guilty narrative is likely to continue to circulate. Theories of guilt will probably never go away in this case and may even be periodically resurrected on social media, potentially requiring an ongoing effort to keep the online world convinced of the innocence of the two people who have long since been legally exonerated.

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