

DAILY JOURNAL NEWSWIRE ARTICLE
<http://www.dailyjournal.com>
© 2006 The Daily Journal Corporation.
All rights reserved.

August 24, 2006

MEDIA MUST AVOID RUSH TO JUDGMENT IN RAMSEY MURDER CASE

Forum Column

By Robert D. Richards and Clay Calvert

Despite the formidable efforts of cable news producers, newspapers and radio talkmeisters, evidence mounts that trial by media is a flawed form of justice.

Coverage of the arrest of John Mark Karr in the JonBenet Ramsey murder is only the latest installment in "Media Mock Trial America," in which a condemning press verdict eventually is overturned by real events.

Nearly a decade ago, the media shined its white-hot incriminating spotlight on the wealthy Boulder, Colo., Ramsey family, whose 6-year-old beauty queen was murdered in her home.

That spotlight never burned out.

A cloud of suspicion hovered over the Ramseys as they struggled to put their lives back together - only to see the girl's mother, Patsy, succumb to ovarian cancer just weeks before the first arrest in the case.

The relentless aspersions against John and Pasty Ramsey and even their young son, Burke, provided pundits countless hours of airtime and column inches. Although none of the Ramseys was ever charged, cable host Geraldo Rivera went so far as to hold a trial of the case - he called it a civil trial - on his television program.

In a 2001 interview with the authors of this article, Patsy Ramsey recalled her horror when she stumbled across this kangaroo court.

"I hadn't watched TV in a long time, but that day I plopped down on the couch and flipped on the TV just as Cyril Wecht, this big expert from Allegheny County, was saying that the Boulder officials need to do what's right," she remembered.

"And all of a sudden, I realized what's happening. They're talking about us. And I just lost it. I was crying. I went to bed for two or three days. I was just so upset about it."

That Geraldo "witness," Cyril Wecht, was back on cable television after Karr's arrest speculating that the new suspect is lying about his

involvement, confidently telling CNN's Ted Rowlands that "[Karr] has torpedoed his own confession."

Ironically, Wecht proclaimed the latest wrinkle in the case "a sad tale" and predicted that it will cause "more pain for the Ramsey family."

The other irony is that the media seemed to relish playing a sound bite from Boulder County District Attorney Mary Lacy, who quotes John Ramsey as saying about Karr's arrest, "Do not jump to conclusions. Do not jump to judgment. Do not speculate. Let the justice system take its course." Ramsey's advice is not likely to be followed. Journalism often doesn't work that way - at least not in recent times.

Lest we forget Richard Jewell, the security guard whose actions in July 1996 at Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta saved countless lives. He faced media torment for months - indeed years - even after federal authorities cleared him of any wrongdoing in the bombing of the park.

Shortly after the explosion, the media focused their spotlight on Jewell as a suspect - indeed, the sole suspect - in the bombing.

Although Eric Rudolph pleaded guilty to bombing the park and now serves life in prison, Jewell still battles one newspaper in civil court about stories that wrongfully fingered him and claimed he "fits the profile of the lone bomber."

Other lives, like those of Los Alamos National Laboratory employee Wen Ho Lee and bioweapons researcher Steven Hatfill, have been turned upside down by "Media Mock Trial America."

The cautionary lesson from the original round of media coverage of the JonBenet Ramsey murder should have been this: Go slow and cautiously when reporting that a person is a suspect in a criminal case because repeating such allegations, day after day, can be just as damning to that suspected person as if he or she were actually convicted of the crime in a court of law.

As Patsy Ramsey told us back in April 2001 when asked what advice she would give to journalists covering murders, "Don't race to the deadline. It's all about who gets there first and accuracy be damned."

Patsy Ramsey, it seems, had developed a keen sense of the scoop mentality that pervades some journalism circles - the desire to get the story first and to beat the competition, with concerns about truth-telling taking a back seat.

She told us that she considered the media's coverage back in 1996 and 1997 "disgraceful" because they "made it into something without trying to find out the truth. They have just perverted what happened, with total disregard for trying to find out who murdered this child, and without doing investigative journalism. They were being fed information from the police. They just took it and ran with it without first questioning the credentials of their source.

"Who is this police officer? What's his agenda? Does he have an agenda?"

Those are fitting questions, framed from the perspective of one intimately burned by the news media. Perhaps journalists would do well to remember them now in their coverage of the John Mark Karr arrest.

It would be another lost lesson were some in the news media to treat Karr with the kind of guilty-until-proven-innocent mentality with which they treated the late Patsy Ramsey.

Robert D. Richards and **Clay Calvert** are professors of journalism and law at the Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pa.