

US media disgraces itself once again

Rush to judgment in the JonBenet Ramsey case

David Walsh
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For approximately twenty-four hours this week, from late afternoon Wednesday to the same time on Thursday, the American mass media was consumed by one story: the arrest of a suspect in the murder of JonBenet Ramsey, the six-year-old girl and child beauty pageant queen killed ten years ago in Colorado.

The Ramsey case has obsessed the American media for a decade. Perhaps only Michael Jackson's difficulties have enjoyed similar longevity. The Ramsey murder a decade ago, along with the O.J. Simpson case in 1994, as one journalist noted, "helped redefine mainstream journalism as a form of soap operatic storytelling," i.e., were benchmarks in its degradation to its current wretched state.

This week, after days and days of non-stop reporting on the London airline "terror plot," the print and broadcast outlets turned on a dime and devoted themselves to the Ramsey case. An arrest was imminent ... an arrest had been made ... a suspect had confessed! We were breathlessly told of the portentous news Wednesday afternoon—and the media was off and running.

On the cable news channels, out of the woodwork sprang reporters, lawyers, legal analysts, "criminal profilers" and "former FBI profilers," private detectives, former policemen, former prosecutors, forensic scientists, even a "sex crimes prosecutor" and more, the vast majority of whom had absolutely no light to shed on the case. Nonetheless, the news channels kept up the chatter.

The anchors and reporters could barely suppress their excitement over the return of the Ramsey case to the front burner. On MSNBC Wednesday at 4 p.m., Monica Crowley, sitting in for Tucker Carlson, began her program: "NBC News has learned that the Ramsey family expects an arrest in the almost 10-year-old murder case." Asked about it, MSNBC legal analyst Susan Filan excitedly responded, "Monica, this is huge, earth-shattering, ground-breaking news. This was an incredibly difficult case to wrap our minds around." The rest of the program was devoted to the case.

Wolf Blitzer interrupted his "Situation Room" on CNN, around 4:20 p.m., with news of the developments in the case. From then on, his program veered uneasily between the Middle East and, in the words of CNN anchor Zain Verjee, who was reporting the story, the episode that "shocked the core of America back in 1996 when she [JonBenet Ramsey] was found brutally murdered and, before that, sexually assaulted and beaten to death in the basement of her house in Boulder, Colorado."

With news of the alleged confession by John Mark Karr in Bangkok, Thailand, the news media began speaking of the unsolved killing as essentially solved. On Fox's "America's Most Wanted" Wednesday night, Ed Miller asked about Karr: "Was this man stalking child beauty contests? Did something in her performance set him off? That's the big question."

CNN's Paula Zahn, in an hour-long program that evening devoted to the

case (with a few minutes spared for international terrorism), declared that the arrest "finally lifts the cloud of suspicion that has been hanging over JonBenet's family, especially over her parents, for more than 10 years. Colorado authorities originally suspected John and Pansy—Patsy Ramsey, that is—of being involved in their daughter's killing. Tragically, today's news comes too late for Patsy Ramsey. JonBenet's mother died of cancer less than two months ago."

On Zahn's program, criminal profiler Pat Brown informed the viewers, "And I guess they [the authorities] got something, because, otherwise, I don't think they would be going public right now."

MSNBC's right-wing Joe Scarborough began his program later that night: "Breaking news: a young beauty queen, a brutal murder and a lurid murder mystery now a decade old. But tonight, a break in the beauty queen's murder mystery. We've got the up-to-the-minute details tonight. Justice delayed but not denied as police made the arrest half a world away. How did they track down the American suspect living in Thailand? We've got the inside story."

The print media was not to be left out. The *New York Daily News* Thursday morning carried the confident headline: "Solved!" The newspaper followed up with: "Sicko bagged in Bangkok," "Kin: suspect obsessed by child slayings," "A killing like none I'd ever seen" and "Dying Patsy was told."

The *Boston Herald* titled its editorial, "Tragedy nears an end." The principal story on the case in Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* began, "The decade-long search for JonBenet Ramsey's killer came to a startling end in Thailand on Wednesday." A *Denver Post* headline claimed: "Family's years of fear, anger come to an end."

Murdoch's *New York Post*, one of the filthiest rags in the country, ran the relatively subdued (for it) headline: "JonBenet Slay Bust—Teach 'admits' killing her: Thai cops." Only the day before the *Post* had still been playing up the London terror plot story, its front page emblazoned with "Baby Bomb: The mom who planned to blow up her own infant in jet terror plot."

NBC's "Today" show on Thursday ran a segment called "How police cracked the JonBenet case." Reporter Michelle Kosinski observed that the Associated Press was reporting the existence of "firm evidence" against Karr.

The flavor of ABC's "Good Morning America" Thursday can be gleaned from this summary of its first half-hour: "Breaking News—Confession In JonBenet Murder, Breaking News—Who Is John Mark Karr?, Breaking News—JonBenet's Father Speaks, Breaking News—JonBenet's Unsolved Mysteries, Breaking News—JonBenet's Aunt Speaks, News Headlines, Weather." The second half-hour included segments on "Scene of the Crime—Inside JonBenet's Home" and "Mom On A Mission—Patsy Ramsey's Journey."

On CNN, anchor Miles O'Brien opened with "A stunning turn in a decade-old mystery. A 41-year-old school teacher, John Mark Karr, an American, arrested in Thailand just a few hours ago, admitting he killed JonBenet Ramsey." O'Brien then ran the video of Karr appearing before the media in Bangkok. Any objective observer would first of all have concluded that this was a very strange and perhaps disturbed man, enough reason to pause and consider the value of his public "confession."

O'Brien, oblivious, plowed ahead, asking CNN justice correspondent Kelli Arenas, "And we don't know, based on all of that, how he came to know or see JonBenet Ramsey at a pageant or whatever?" Arenas replied, "No, right. That is the million-dollar question, you know, how did he come in contact with her? We don't know."

Karr was more or less convicted and heading for the death chamber. Everything else seemed a mere formality.

It was left to the district attorney of Boulder, Colorado, Mary Lacy, of all people, to inject some sanity into the process. Addressing a news conference Thursday morning, Lacy commented, "John Karr is presumed innocent. We are rightfully constrained by the code of professional conduct and the presumption of innocence from answering those questions that you want answered this morning." She added that everyone should heed the "poignant advice of John Ramsey [father of JonBenet]," referring to a statement he had made the day before: "Do not jump to conclusions, do not jump to judgments, do not speculate. Let the justice system take its course."

Contradictions in the case began to emerge. Karr's own tortured history and obsessions cast further doubt on the credibility of his confession.

The media, so eager to pin the crime on him a day earlier, began to grow nervous. Now, on Chris Matthews's "Hardball" on MSNBC Thursday evening, former sex crimes prosecutor Wendy Murphy was explaining that "in every state, a confession alone is always inadequate, because frankly, crazy people can confess and be falsely convicted on confessions alone, so we always require some level of corroboration and, look, there are already so many holes in this guy's [Karr's] story."

Joe Scarborough, convinced that justice had been "delayed but not denied" only twenty-four hours earlier, was backtracking rapidly. "But you know, there are so many parts of Karr's story that just don't add up," he told viewers Thursday night: "First of all, Karr says he drugged and sexually assaulted JonBenet before she died, but an autopsy on the 6-year-old found no drugs or alcohol in her body, although she had been sexually assaulted. Karr also claims he picked up JonBenet from school the day she was killed, but she was on Christmas vacation at that time. Plus, his ex-wife said Karr was in Alabama the day JonBenet was killed, not thousands of miles away in Colorado."

On Scarborough's program, Dan Abrams, NBC chief legal correspondent, more or less acknowledged that the media had rushed in before it knew any of the facts: "I think yesterday, we were at the point when we broke this story around 3:40, 4:00 o'clock yesterday, where it seemed there was an arrest—it seemed that this case might be solved, that they may have finally cracked the JonBenet Ramsey case. That was before we heard from this guy. This is before he's rolled out into a press conference in Bangkok to give this sort of bizarre accounting of what had happened, admitting that it was an accident, but unwilling to talk about details, then saying how much he loved JonBenet, et cetera, et cetera."

Why hadn't any of these possibilities occurred to Abrams the day before? This comment alone is a damning indictment.

CNN's Zahn reported Thursday that Colorado authorities during their news conference had been "incredibly cautious." Unlike Zahn herself the night before. She had meanwhile discovered that "some parts of Karr's story don't add up ... So tonight we're focusing this hour on these troubling questions."

By Friday morning, NBC's "Today" show had unearthed "Contradictions in JonBenet Case," while "Good Morning America" on

ABC was asking itself whether the break in the Ramsey murder had been "too easy."

The front page of the *New York Daily News* Friday morning, fresh from its "Solved!" the day before, exclaimed "A Twisted Tale: Doubts cloud suspect's confession as creepy details of ex-teacher's life emerge." Already later on Thursday, the *Denver Post* had struck a more cautionary note: "Cracks in confession fuel skepticism."

Only Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* seemed entirely unrepentant Friday, its cover screaming "How I killed her: Creep's chilling drug & sex tale."

By late Friday afternoon the Ramsey case had settled back into the second or third slot on the cable news programs. Anchors and reporters and experts offered no explanations as to why only 48 hours earlier they had moved in for the kill. They were onto the next sensationalized story ("Bomb threat note found on plane, police say," "September 11th hero remained anonymous till now," etc.). No media or public figure ever accounts for any of the distortions, lies and disasters that occur in American life.

From the beginning, in its treatment of the JonBenet Ramsey murder the American media has pandered to and encouraged the very worst instincts in the population: prurience, a fascination with the lives of the wealthy, obsession with celebrity in general. The television networks, daily newspapers and weekly news magazines have wallowed in the gutter in this case and so many others—the Simpson trial, Michael Jackson's legal problems, the Chandra Levy and Laci Peterson murders, etc.

The Ramsey case shows the media at its ugliest, most shallow and most ignorant. No doubt a political motive was involved here too. The terror bomb plot in Britain was threatening to unravel, or at least disappoint, the war in Lebanon had not achieved US aims, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are disastrous. The media instinctively strove to change the subject. What does it know best, what makes it most comfortable? The intersection of sex scandals or sex crimes with the lives of rich or famous people.

Both the billionaires who own and operate America's "free press" and its leading figures, for the most part, are human refuse. They write or say whatever suits their immediate purposes, which corresponds to the economic and political interests of the largest corporations, the richest individuals and the most predatory circles in Washington. They lie as ordinary people draw breath.

Their behavior in the Ramsey case is of a piece with everything else they do. Nothing they write or say should be given the slightest credibility.



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