

## Counter narratives and controversial crimes

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## **Counter narratives and controversial crimes: The Wikipedia article for the ‘Murder of Meredith Kercher’**

### **Counter-narratives and Wikipedia**

Narrative theorists have long recognised that narrative is a selective mode of representation, one which allows the narrator to depict the protagonists and their actions from a particular perspective. The choice to select and evaluate of one set of events rather than another, and to organise those events into recognisable patterns which carry ideological weight are not neutral, and may allow the protagonists to construe themselves and others in Proppian fashion as heroes, victims or villains. This subjective process is by no means static, but rather fluid and open to change. There is always more than one way to tell a story, which may alter according to its teller, audience and the social or historical context in which the story is told. But multiple versions of the ‘same’ events are not always valued in the same way: some versions may become established as dominant accounts, whilst others are marginalised.

The alternative versions which refuse or resist dominant accounts have been described in narrative inquiry as counter narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004). Typically, counter narratives contrast with the master narrative (Lyotard, 1984), for example by providing the narrator with opportunities to recast the protagonists in a different role from that given in the dominant version, or to retell events with a different outcome or evaluation. The potential of counter narratives has been explored most fully in the social science research which has explored the macro-level, cultural implications of storytelling, for example in relation to education (Priyadharshini, 2011), politics (Banting, 2007) or history (Luckhurst, 2012). These studies rightly draw attention to the ideological contexts and functions of narration, but more work is needed to explore the mechanics of how counter and dominant narratives are positioned relative to each other within specific contexts and how the macro-level, social

interpretation of narrative can be realised through micro-level linguistic resources used in textual examples of narration. As Bamberg and Andrews (2004) put it, we need to be clearer about what it is that is contested through counter narratives, and exactly how that process of ‘countering’ might take place.

This essay explores the relationship between macro-level social narratives and micro-level narrative analysis with reference to the counter narratives which emerge in a particular context: the chronicling of non-fictional topics in Wikipedia articles. The online encyclopedia Wikipedia has been in existence for a decade, contains over 24 million articles, and is now regarded as one of the most visited Internet sites (Alexa, 2013). Wikipedia is a large scale example of collaborative writing, where anyone with an Internet connection may set up an account and edit the content of the articles. In order to facilitate such a collaborative endeavour, the Wikipedian community has developed many emergent collective practices (Mittell, forthcoming), such as an agreed writing style, and criteria used to judge the quality of articles, reliability of source, what kinds subject matter are considered as noteworthy, the etiquette for how contributors should communicate with one another, and so on. Most notably, these practices are guided by the ‘pillars’ of the Wikipedian community, which comprise Neutral Point of View (NPOV), No Original Research (NOR) and Verifiability. Even though these principles and practices are subject to change over time (and so cannot be regarded as a monolithic or static), they are united in the common endeavour of managing conflicting perspectives in order to reach a point of consensus. For example, No Original Research discourages individualistic contributions, while the guidelines for Neutral Point of View require the citation of multiple perspectives, stating that

Editing from a neutral point of view (NPOV) means representing fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible without bias, all significant views that have been published by reliable sources.

The conflicts and consensus between Wikipedian contributors are negotiated within different spaces within Wikipedia's architecture, where there is a clear difference between the front page of an article and the materials which are located in a subordinate position behind this. The front page of the Wikipedia article is its default view, which appears superficially homogenous as the contributions of individual editors are not marked on this page. Two further archives are behind the front page, where the appearance of consensus is maintained to a varying degree, and where controversy can emerge instead. The page history is an archive of every revision made to the article, marked automatically by the editor's user name or IP address, the time of the revision, and arranged in reverse chronological order (see Figure 1).

The screenshot shows the 'Revision history' tab for the article 'Murder of Meredith Kercher'. At the top, there are tabs for 'Article' and 'Talk', and buttons for 'Read', 'Edit', and 'View history'. The title 'Murder of Meredith Kercher: Revision history' is displayed, followed by a link to 'View logs for this page'. Below this is a 'Browse history' section with filters for 'From year (and earlier)', 'From month (and earlier)', and 'Tag filter', along with a 'Go' button. A legend explains the notation: '(cur)' for current version, '(prev)' for preceding version, 'm' for minor edit, '→' for section edit, and '←' for automatic edit summary. It also provides links for 'External tools' like 'Revision history search', 'Contributors', 'User edits', 'Number of watchers', and 'Page view statistics'. A 'Compare selected revisions' button is present. The main list of revisions shows the following entries:

- (cur | prev) 00:41, 6 January 2013 170.223.127.19 (talk) . . (136,782 bytes) (+5) . . *(Full name)* (undo)
- (cur | prev) 10:32, 5 January 2013 Wikipeterproject (talk | contribs) . . (136,777 bytes) (0) . . *(According to the wikilink, South London is a formally name is a proper noun and should be capitalised.)* (undo)
- (cur | prev) 00:50, 5 January 2013 Rothorpe (talk | contribs) . . (136,777 bytes) (-50) . . *(rv goodfaith edit---clutter---not a bio, and dates are in box)*
- (cur | prev) 00:35, 5 January 2013 107.202.24.228 (talk) . . (136,827 bytes) (+5) . . (undo)
- (cur | prev) 00:34, 5 January 2013 107.202.24.228 (talk) . . (136,822 bytes) (+45) . . (undo)
- (cur | prev) 23:36, 25 November 2012 68.105.97.86 (talk) . . (136,777 bytes) (+1) . . *(→Knox's withdrawal of her statement)* (undo)

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Page History for the 'Murder of Meredith Kercher'.

Alongside this, the talk pages for the article are forums where the article contributors can ask for advice, or negotiate what content should be included. These three spaces (the front page, page history, and talk pages) are present in each of the 285 language versions of Wikipedia.

The transparent and fluid nature of contributing to Wikipedia has made it an object of interest to those interested in the processes of collaborative, online writing (Jones, 2008), as a means of observing the real time development of collective memory (Ferron and Massa, 2011), and for its relationship to other forms of media (Sundin, 2011). As yet, Wikipedia has not been scrutinized as an environment which might encourage narration (though see Page, forthcoming on serial storytelling). Indeed, Wikipedia in its entirety is not a narrative, but a database that is similar to the non-narrative genre of the discourse colony (Hoey, 2001). Instead, narratives can be found at the level of individual articles within Wikipedia. Not every article is a narrative, and some topics seem more likely than others to be structured using chronological order, such as articles which focus on biographies or notable events. In particular, events which have a quest-like trajectory (like the controversial crimes considered in this essay) are perhaps most likely to resemble a narrative, and so should not be taken as representative of the entire storytelling potential of Wikipedia. Nonetheless, the mechanisms by which contributors can position material in line with or counter to dominant narratives apply broadly to the site, and are best understood in relation to the Wikipedian community and the site's characteristics as a form of social media.

The affordances of Wikipedia influence the distinctive narrative dimensions (Ochs and Capps, 2001) of its articles in line with trends found in social media more generally, namely, the shift towards open-ended story structures, multiple rather than single tellership and contexts which draw together offline and online interactional resources (Page, 2012). The open-ended, collaborative and highly contextualised nature of the narration in Wikipedia articles can be exploited in the service of countering dominant narratives. In terms of the

linearity, even while the article's front page will organise the material in conventional, chronological order, the inherently fluent, ongoing nature of the article's revisions mean that the story's structure is likely to be open-ended rather than closed. A Wikipedia article is never regarded as complete: one version of events can always be retold from another perspective and so destabilise a single, dominant narrative. The collaborative nature of Wikipedian editing means that single tellership is rejected in favour of innovative forms of co-tellership where the participants can add to, edit and delete the content created by another contributor. The necessarily interactive process opens up dialogue and debate between counter and master narratives. Finally, Wikipedia is a highly intertextual site, which like other hypertextual documents is embedded in a network of connections to other online materials, and is characterised by citations which support its core principle of Verifiability. These citations illustrate the relationship between the article and versions of events that circulate in sources beyond Wikipedia: typically, forms of mainstream media which may carry differing ideological perspectives and value depending on context. The citations thus act as a conduit for the master and counter narratives that circulate in social contexts beyond the Wikipedia site. The potential of open-ended linearity and multiple tellership to shape counter and dominant narratives is illustrated with reference to a particular Wikipedia article: 'The Murder of Meredith Kercher.'

### **The 'Murder of Meredith Kercher' article**

Wikipedia contains many articles which document controversial crimes, for example crimes which remain unresolved, where the accused parties have evaded conviction, or where convictions have been later overturned. The following analysis focuses on one crime which in recent history has been highly controversial and drew international attention from the media on a significant scale. Meredith Kercher was a British student who was murdered in

Perugia, Italy, on November 1, 2007. The suspects accused of the crime were Amanda Knox (an American student who shared a flat with the victim), Raffaelo Sollecito (Knox's Italian boyfriend), and Rudy Guede (from Côte d'Ivoire, but resident in Italy from childhood). The crime became sensationalised in the media from the outset, with a suggested backdrop of sex games, drugs and even occult practices (Liddle, 2011). However, the key controversy centred on the guilt or innocence of the suspects, in particular Knox and Sollecito. All three suspects were convicted of murder and sexual violence in 2009. But Knox and Sollecito always maintained their innocence, and in 2011, both were acquitted and released from prison. At the time of writing, their acquittal has been contested by the Italian Attorney General.

The multiple narratives that surround the Murder of Meredith Kercher are complex. At one level, there are accounts of the murder narrated by the suspects. Each suspect's narrative differed from that given by the others, and Knox made allegations against a fourth suspect (Patrick Lumumba) which were later dismissed as slander. Knox and Sollecito also gave multiple, contradictory, accounts of the night of the murder (later explained in the light of memory loss caused by taking drugs), and withdrew material which had first been submitted to the police. Beyond this, the media reports of the crime and later convictions varied considerably. The media's controversy focused most prominently on the guilt or innocence of Knox, with opposing sides differentiated according to national context (Annunziato, 2011). In Europe, the media demonised Knox as the guilty party, painting her as a femme fatale whose alleged behaviour after the murder and under interrogation appeared out of keeping with that expected from an innocent witness. In North America, the media coverage tended instead to be sympathetic to Knox, argued for her innocence, and presented her as a victim of the negative coverage she had suffered in the Italian media and treatment she had received from the Italian police and legal system.

The contrasting narratives of Knox as guilty villain or innocent victim drew on powerful master narratives of race and gender. The negative treatment of Knox made much of her alleged sexual activity, which was sensationalised in the European press (labelling her pejoratively as a ‘she devil’, and ‘vixen’, for example). In this schema, female sexual behaviour was treated as the subject of surveillance and suspicion. In contrast, the European representation of Knox was considered an example of anti-Americanism. Over the years, the dominant narratives told by media reports (in the United Kingdom, at least) have shifted as new evidence has come to light, and the stance towards Knox has changed accordingly. The media narratives told about the Kercher murder neatly exemplify the relative and dynamic positioning of counter narratives. The national context (American, British or Italian) determines which version of events is positioned as dominant, and that positioning is subject to change over time (before or after the acquittals of Knox and Sollecito in 2011).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the ‘Murder of Meredith Kercher’ Wikipedia article has been marked by high levels of controversy. There are versions of the article in the English, German, Persian, Finnish, French, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Russian and Simple English Wikipedias. The article in the English Wikipedia was first authored on November 13, 2007 and between that point and January 2013 was edited 7958 times by 967 distinct users. In January 2013, the front page of the article consisted of 13,150 words, and contained images of the main protagonists (Kercher, Guede), the scene of the crime, and the prison where Knox and Sollecito were held. Editing the page prompted a long, high scale, editing war, which claimed that the article was not maintaining a Neutral Point of View and had violated the policy for No Original Research. The arguments reached such proportions that the page was completely deleted and then rewritten after a petition claimed that European editors were suppressing the inclusion of material which supported Knox’s innocence. The materials available in the Wikipedia archive demonstrate the use of open-ended structures and multiple



tellership as mechanisms for positioning the changing dominant and counter narratives of the Kercher case.

## **Structure**

The option to select and structure material allows a narrator to position a story within an ideological framework of counter or dominant narratives. These structural choices may construct a narrative as a completed sequence, arranged around a value-laden point of closure. Or the narrative can be presented in an open-ended arrangement, for example without a final outcome, or where multiple versions of the event can be set alongside each other as alternative accounts. Open-ended structures are a key resource for counter narratives, for they create spaces to contest or rewrite dominant narratives and their implied points of closure, and to expose the selectivity of the master narratives. Wikipedia articles are inherently open-ended insofar as they are always open to revision, but in terms of content can also select arrange events in such a way as to imply a single, unified plot, or to represent alternative storylines. The archive of revisions to the ‘Murder of Meredith Kercher’ show how open-ended structures were used to position different versions of the story as dominant or counter narratives, and how that positioning changed over time and according to cultural context.

The early versions of the article created in the English and Italian Wikipedias (in 2007 and 2008 respectively) differ considerably in content and structure from the versions that were available in January 2013. Unsurprisingly, the earlier versions were shorter and appear retrospectively as incomplete, lacking the key turning points in the case that took place in subsequent years (convictions and acquittals). The differences in structure are indicated through the Table of Contents given in the four versions considered in detail (summarised in Table 1).

| English Wikipedia           |   | Italian Wikipedia           |   |
|-----------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| <u>November 2007</u>        | <u>January 2013</u>                             | <u>September 2008</u>       | <u>January 2013</u>   |
| 1. Background               | 1. Meredith Kercher                             | 1. Biographical             | 1. The victim   |
| 2. Murder and Investigation |   | 2. Murder and Investigation | 2. Mode and Circumstances of Murder                                 |
| 3. Suspects                 | 1.1 Background                                  | 3. Suspects                 | 3. The Prosecution  |
| 3.1 Amanda Knox             | 1.2 Via della Pergola 7                         | 4. Internal Links           | 3.1 The Case Lumumba  |
| 3.2 Raffaello Sollecito     | 1.3 Murder                                      | 5. Notes                    | 3.2 Guede's Conviction and Sentence                                 |
|                             | 1.4 Witnesses                                   |                             | 3.3 The Acquittal and Appeal of Amanda Knox and Raffaello Sollecito |
| 3.3 Rudy Guede              | 1.5 Alarm raised                                |                             | 3.4 The alleged confession of Guede                                 |
| 3.4 Patrick Lumumba         | 1.6 Discovery of the body                       |                             | 3.5 The second trial of Amanda Knox for slander                     |
| 4. Public Reaction          | 2. Prosecutions                                 |                             | 4. Process before the Court of Cassation                            |
| 5. Tributes                 | 2.1 Italian criminal procedure                  |                             | 5. Movies   |
| 6. References               | 2.2 Amanda Knox                                 |                             | 6. TV shows dedicated to the 'murder of Meredith Kercher'           |
| 7. Internal Links           | 2.3 Raffaello Sollicito                         |                             | 7. Notes  |
|                             | 2.4 Rudy Guede                                  |                             | 8. Other Projects   |
|                             | 3. Summary of prosecution and defence arguments |                             | 9. See Also   |
|                             | 3.1 Guede's criminal history and DNA            |                             |   |
|                             | 3.2 Fingerprints                                |                             |   |
|                             | 3.3 Footprints                                  |                             |   |
|                             | 3.4 DNA samples on the bra clasp and knife      |                             |   |
|                             | 3.5 Time of death                               |                             |   |

|  |
|--|
| 3.6 Motive   |
| 3.7 Break-in   |
| 3.8 Alibis   |
| 4. Public Prosecutor's Office of Perugia and appeal to the Italian Supreme Court |
| 5. Related   |
| proceedings  |
| 6. Reaction  |
| 6.1 Media coverage   |
| 6.2 Family reaction  |
| 6.3 Support for Knox and Sollecito   |
| 7. Aftermath   |
| 7.1 Meredith Kercher Scholarship fund  |
| 8. Notes   |
| 9. References  |
| 10. Further reading and external links   |
| 10.1 Books   |
| 10.2 Television  |

Table 1. Table of Contents for versions of the ‘Murder of Meredith Kercher’ article.

At the time when the earlier versions of the English and Italian MoMK article were created in 2007 and 2008 respectively, the quest for justice following the crime was incomplete. Police investigations were still taking place and none of the suspects had been convicted or sentenced. As a result, the guilt or innocence of each suspect was uncertain, and open to debate. The statements given by each of the suspects were one source of evidence used to position them as innocent or guilty. The English Wikipedia version of November 2007 documented each of suspects’ narratives, presenting each in a separate subdivision of the article (3.1-3.4). On the surface, this would seem to support Wikipedia’s core principle,

‘Neutral Point of View’ by representing different viewpoints: each counter narrative of the crime being given equal weight. However, the narration in the suspects’ subsections varied so as to foreground the dominant narrative of Knox’s potential guilt that circulated in the European press at that time.

The length of the narratives in each of the subsections suggests that it is Knox’s story which is given textual prominence as the first and longest account: Knox (469 words), Sollecito (136 words), Guede (245 words), Lumumba (133 words). The representation of the suspects also suggests the centrality of Knox. Sollecito is described as ‘Knox’s boyfriend’ (whereas Knox is not conversely described as Sollecito’s girlfriend), and Lumumba ‘employed Amanda Knox’. While the background of the male suspects included their familial identity, with Sollecito described as ‘The son of a urologist from Bari, and from an affluent family’ and Guede, ‘informally adopted by the family of a wealthy local businessman Paolo Caporali,’ no details about Knox’s family are given. The omission of family background serves to deny Knox credentials (for example, positioned as a daughter or a member of a respectable socio-economic class), and to exclude Knox’s family as actors from the narrative: a key omission given their role in campaigning for their daughter’s innocence. Instead, the narrative in Knox’s subsection relied on a ‘leaked report’ from *The Times* newspaper giving details from the Italian legal proceedings which suggested a sexual motivation for the crime (not mentioned in any of the other suspect’s accounts), and ended with the prosecution’s description of Knox and Sollecito returning to the scene of the crime (a version of events which Knox and Sollecito later denied).

The potential for multiple accounts of the same story to create interpretive instability can carry particular weight in legal contexts. Changing a statement can suggest that a witness is unreliable. When that witness is accused of a crime, retelling events in a different way can be interpreted as a signal of guilt. Establishing a single account of the murder of Meredith

Kercher was complicated by the contradictory versions of events that two of the suspects (Knox and Sollecito) gave to Police. One version implicated Knox's involvement (a narrative in which she described her presence at the crime scene) and one suggested her innocence (a narrative in which she was not present, but with Raffaello at his flat). In the 2007 English Wikipedia version, the contradictory statements given by both Knox and Sollecito are mentioned, but the instability in Knox's account was given greater emphasis. The subsection 'Amanda Knox' included a relatively lengthy, 150-word extract, directly quoted from the statement which placed her at the scene of the crime and was later the grounds for her conviction of slander. In comparison, Sollecito's retellings were only summarised as a brief narrative report, 'he has changed his recollection of the evening.' In this case, retelling each version of Knox's statement does not provide multiple perspectives in the service of Neutral Point of View, but rather could be interpreted as strengthening the dominant macro-social narrative which maintained her guilt.

But dominant narratives are not immutable, and can change over time and according to context. In Wikipedia, the relative prominence of the dominant narrative is dependent (at least in part) on the position of that narrative within the site archive, where the most recent version published as the front page of the article is also the most prominent. Counter narratives can then supersede earlier, dominant narratives as new material is added to the front page, and previously dominant versions become subordinate, only retrieved through searching within the page history archive. Not all counter narratives rise in prominence in the same way, and can be constrained by cultural context (amongst other factors). In the 'Murder of Meredith Kercher' article, the dominant narrative of Knox's guilt continued to influence the selection and structure of material in the Italian Wikipedia version, but not in the English Wikipedia where it was countered by the narrative which emphasised Knox's innocence and recast her as the victim of media misrepresentation and police maltreatment.

The ongoing dominant narrative of Knox's alleged guilt is suggested by the additional events which were included in the Italian Wikipedia version of article available in January 2013. Like the English version, the more recent edits added material which documented the convictions of the three suspects and the subsequent acquittal of Knox and Sollecito. But in contrast to the English version, the Italian article also contained two additional sections: the Second Trial of Amanda Knox for Slander (section 3.5) and the Process before the Court of Cassation (section 4). Both events depict Knox in a negative light, for example by reiterating the charges she made against the police for maltreatment whilst under investigation (which were found to be libellous), and by throwing doubt on the validity of the acquittal outcome.

The English Wikipedia version of the 'Murder of Meredith Kercher' article was revised in a rather different way. As the summary of the Table of Contents in Table 1 indicates, the later article became substantially longer than the version available in 2007, and the early and later Italian counterparts. The subsequent selection and structuring of material shift the focus of the article from the crime (the murder of Meredith Kercher) to a chronicle of the processes by which the convictions took place (the investigation, convictions and acquittals of Knox). Accordingly, the dominant and counter narratives of Knox's guilt or innocence were no longer contrasted on the basis of multiple witness statements given by the suspects. Instead, the structural organisation of the article in 2013 categorised the sections of the article in terms of the legal processes (Section 3: Prosecution and Defence Arguments) and media response (Section 6.1) which juxtaposed the opposing accounts given by legal personnel (prosecution and defence lawyers), and contrasting media sources (British, Italian and American journalists). These storylines positioned the journalists, police, lawyers and judges in agentive roles (as villains or heroic figures) while Knox was cast as the target of their actions ('salacious reporting', 'interrogation', 'sentencing').

The evolution of the section headed ‘Amanda Knox’ illustrated the dominant narrative’s changing representation of Knox from villain to victim. Unlike the earlier, English version, which excluded Knox’s family relationships, the 2013 version begins with a background section which described Knox and her ‘two younger sisters’, ‘mother’, ‘father’, along with an account of her childhood which emphasised her socio-economic class, and education in a Catholic school. The section closed with character description from ‘friends’ which listed Knox’s typical activities as sports, domestic baking, and ‘positive thinking’: attributes which align more readily with master narratives of a virtuous (if misunderstood) heroine, rather than the sexualised villain of earlier accounts. In line with this, the subsections which follow no longer imply Knox’s agency, but instead itemised the criminal and legal proceedings to which Knox was subject (labelled as ‘Police focus on Knox,’ ‘Interrogation,’ ‘Statement and Arrest,’ through to ‘Prosecution,’ and ‘Appeals and Release’). The counter narratives thus shifted in focus to contest the extent to which Knox could be positioned as a victim at the hands of the Italian media, police and prosecutors (for example, contrasting whether or not she was maltreated and by whom, with different accounts given by journalists and lawyers from both sides of the case).

The new, dominant narrative of Knox’s innocence in the Wikipedia article downplayed the open-ended, multiple retellings of the crime. Instead, the article used a closed structure which concluded with an evaluative statement that emphasised the position of Knox as a wronged victim. The subordination of open-ended, narrative multiplicity is exemplified in the 2013 treatment of Knox’s contentious, retracted witness statement which featured prominently in the 2007 version as evidence of interpretive instability and implied guilt. In 2013, the witness statement was recontextualised as evidence of her victimised role. The quotation from the retracted statement in the later version was less prominent, reduced from 157 to 36 words and embedded in a longer portion of testimony taken from Knox’s trial, in

which she qualified the instability of her account on the grounds of psychological pressure caused during police interrogation. The dominant narrative of Knox's innocence and role as victim repeated the new interpretation of the retracted statement as a point of narrative closure. The 2013 'Amanda Knox' section concluded with a quotation from the appeal judges, 'that the statements she made incriminating herself during interrogation were evidence of her confusion while under "great psychological pressure"'. The new dominant narrative thus used the conventions of a closed structure in the form of an evaluative statement from an authoritative source to emphasise the more recent interpretation of evidence and to shift the position of Knox from villain to victim.

## **Tellership**

Tellership is a further resource used to position dominant and counter narratives. While single tellership might suggest a unified voice, the distribution of narration between multiple tellers opens up the possibility to express counter versions of events, or to evaluate events from differing perspectives. In Wikipedian articles, the burden of narration is distributed between different contributors, who in turn may include citations from materials authored by others and quotations attributed to various protagonists represented in the narrative in question. The contrast in stance and the relative prominence given to one voice rather than another can be seen in the discussions between contributors on the article's talk pages, the selection of citations and quoted material on the article's main page (and which may change with each subsequent revision of the article).

The selection of material included on the front page of a Wikipedia article must be negotiated carefully between contributors, who use the Wikipedian 'pillars' in order to justify their editorial choices. The three core guidelines (Neutral Point of View, No Original Research and Verifiability) are interdependent in their reliance on external source material.



In order to include an event or an opinion within an article, the contributor must be able to provide evidence for that material in the form of a published, reliable citation. Verification is thus one mechanism by which a dominant narrative can be established or a counter narrative excluded from a Wikipedia article. Verification was invoked often in the arguments which took place in the talk pages for the ‘Murder of Meredith Kercher’ article. For example, the debate over which details of Knox’s behaviour whilst on trial should be included in the article was based (in part) upon whether those details had been published in reliable citations. One contributor argued for their choice of materials on the following grounds:

It *has* been suggested a great deal, **by the best sources**, that trial of Knox was affected by her demeanor so an article on the murder of Meredith Kercher will touch on that aspect of Knox's trial for the murder (my emphasis in bold).

But verifiability alone does not resolve conflict. As another contributor put it, ‘Collaborative editing requires discussion and reliable sources, not for you to be in agreement.’ In the case of the Meredith Kercher article, published material which documented the case was in abundance, but often contradictory in stance.

Like other Wikipedia articles, the contributors to the ‘Murder of Meredith Kercher’ article documented current events. As a result, the ‘reliable’ citations used to legitimate the selection of materials often include mainstream media reports (rather than print books). The content of Wikipedia articles is symptomatic of wider media convergence, where the dominant narratives that circulate in the mainstream news media are reproduced through citation of those reports. Given that the dominant narrative of Knox’s guilt or innocence depended on the national context of the media reports used for citations, this posed a particular dilemma for the editors of the article. As one contributor said,

We can all find reliable sources to back up our personal biases. The challenge is to try to *avoid* doing that and instead keep the article faithful to what you would get if you

could put all reliable sources into a blender and then distill [sic] the result down to encyclopedic length.

The choice of citations included in different versions of the article illustrates the extent to which the narratives circulating in the mainstream media from different national contexts were used to legitimate the account given in the Wikipedia article in different periods of time.

The citations for the four selected versions of the ‘Murder of Meredith Kercher’ Wikipedia article were analysed according to the nationality of the publication, and the results summarised in Table 2.

|           | English |      | Italian |      |
|-----------|---------|------|---------|------|
|           | 2007    | 2013 | 2008    | 2013 |
| UK        | 66      | 43   | 92      | 43   |
| USA       | 31      | 47   | 0       | 9    |
| Italy     | 1       | 8    | 8       | 48   |
| Australia | 0       | 2    | 0       | 0    |

Table 2. Frequency of news reports cited in versions of the MoMK article according to nationality of the publication (as a percentage).

The figures in Table 2 show that the earlier versions of the English and Italian articles cited more news reports published in the British news and cited fewer reports from American sources. The dominant narrative in the British media at that time focused on Knox’s alleged guilt and sensationalised her alleged sexual behaviour, as suggested in the following headlines.

How the sex game went wrong. Judge’s report. *Telegraph*, 9 November 2007

Meredith Kercher suspects ‘flirted and shopped for lingerie’ after murder. *The Times*, 23 November, 2007

Foxy Knoxy: Inside the twisted world of murdered Meredith’s flatmate. *Daily Mail*, 6 November 2007

The 2013 Italian version of the article still included relatively few citations of American sources, relying instead on British and Italian sources. Rather than drawing on current British news coverage, the citations in the 2013 Italian version continued to rely on British news reports from 2007, such as those quoted above which were aligned with a dominant narrative which positioned Knox as the story’s villain.

In contrast, the 2013 English version of the article balanced the number of citations taken from British and American news sources more evenly (43 and 47 percent respectively). The selection of national publication also varied according to date. The majority of the cited American reports date from 2010 or after (67%), whilst the majority of the cited British reports (65%) date from between 2007 and 2009, suggesting a contrast where the British reports are more concerned with the period of the crime and first convictions, while the American reports are from the period leading up to and after Knox’s acquittal. The later, American citations provide the material which emphasised a narrative where Knox was cast as the wronged victim, and the earlier convictions presented as problematic as in the following headlines.

The scapegoating of Amanda Knox. *Los Angeles Times*, 4 October, 2011

Forensic experts in Amanda Knox appeal reject key DNA evidence. CBS News, 25 July, 2011

Amanda Knox: Italian Civil Court awards Knox \$55,000 in damages for violation of privacy. ABC News, 22 March 2010.

The British reports cited in the 2013 Wikipedia article are all but one different from those cited in 2007, and no longer include reports which sensationalise Knox's sexual behaviour. The choice of citation thus demonstrates the way in which the earlier master narrative of Knox's guilt has been replaced by the new dominant narrative of her innocence and victimisation. The one citation which from a British source which implied the earlier narrative of Knox's guilt was included, not as a plausible counter narrative, but as an example used to illustrate Knox's victimisation by the European media.

The use of secondary material in the service of Verifiability can also be used to legitimate the inclusion of quoted material within a Wikipedia article. The options for representing and attributing quotation are a further, crucial mechanism by which dominant and counter narratives are positioned relative to each other. Reported speech can be represented more or less directly. Caldas-Coulthard (1992: 76) points out that the heightened vividness and ability to verify the words reported in direct speech can be used by news reporters to 'reiterate and reinforce their primary discourse.' In the four selected versions of the 'Murder of Meredith Kercher' article, the use of quotation varied in form, according to the person attributed for the speech and whether the reported speech implied Knox's guilt or innocence.

|         |      | Direct Speech | Indirect Speech | Total |
|---------|------|---------------|-----------------|-------|
| English | 2007 | 11            | 3               | 14    |
|         | 2013 | 44            | 59              | 103   |
| Italian | 2008 | 0             | 1               | 1     |
|         | 2013 | 3             | 0               | 3     |

Table 3. Frequency of direct and indirect speech in selected versions of the English and Italian Wikipedia articles, ‘Murder of Meredith Kercher.’

In the 2007 version of the English article, direct speech occurred more often than indirect quotation. The speakers whose words are reported include Amanda Knox (4 instances), Judge Matteini (3 instances), police, investigators, friends of Knox, students, Caporali and an unnamed ‘man’ (1 instance each). The majority of the content of the reported speech suggested Knox’s guilt. For example, a quotation from court reports foregrounded the Judge’s speculation of the crime’s sexual motive: ‘Matteini suggested that Knox and Sollecito had been seeking to "experience extreme sensations, intense sexual relations which break up the monotony of everyday life."' Likewise, in the Italian version current in 2013, the direct speech is clearly a resource for constructing the same narrative of Knox’s alleged guilt. The three instances of direct speech all quote figures of authority who contested Knox’s acquittal, such as the Italian Attorney General, who called it ‘una sentenza con "tantissime omissioni" ed "errori"' (‘a sentence with “many omissions” and “errors”’).

In contrast, the English version of 2013, the proportion of direct and indirect speech is comparatively balanced. The speakers whose words are reported still foreground Amanda Knox (16%), but also include Guede (11%), the Italian police (9%), judges, lawyers and journalists. Three journalists are quoted in particular: Burleigh, Dempsey and Follain. These three writers covered the case for their respective newspapers, and later published books based on their knowledge of events. The reported speech contains quotations which support both sides of the story, and juxtapose implications of Knox’s guilt and innocence alongside each other. But 50% of the reported speech tends to support a narrative of Knox’s innocence, while 25% is more aligned with the narrative of her guilt, compared with the speech which relates to Guede’s involvement which statements which suggest his guilt are nearly equal

with those which claim the opposite (6% and 8% respectively). Like the choice of citation, the selection of reported speech allows different versions of events to be included, but the relative prominence given to a particular teller (such as a news source or narrative protagonist) as illustrated through the frequency and form of reported speech can vary to prioritise one version rather than another. In the case of this article, the changes in reported speech are in line with the changes to cited material, where the narrative given prominence in the early versions of the article (Knox's guilt) are later replaced by the new, dominant narrative of her innocence.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have considered the potential of Wikipedia as a site where counter and dominant narratives can be negotiated, and shown how this process of negotiation took place in the evolution of one article in particular ('The Murder of Meredith Kercher'). The importance of tellership and structure as resources which can be used to position dominant and counter narratives relative to each other also extends to narratives about different subject matter and told in other contexts. As a general principle, closed structures and single tellership are more likely to inhibit counter narratives whilst open-endedness and multiple tellership are more likely to destabilise a dominant account. The mechanisms by which counter and dominant narratives negotiate their position through structure and tellership will be dependent on context, and requires an analytical approach that can take account of the processes of narrative production and interaction, not just a textual analysis of the narrative as a decontextualized product. These contexts will be many and various, ranging across media, cultures and historical periods. But the stories told in social media contexts are a particularly rich resource, with burgeoning, public archives of interactions which allows us to examine how counter narratives of different kinds are enabled, made visible and given prominence in

different sites and by narrators from different social and cultural contexts. The discussion in this essay is thus but the first step in tracing how contemporary counter narratives might emerge and function, and calls for research to further extend this area of narrative research.

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