

# McCanns' guilt already decided in trial-by-media

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AGENDA

HEIDI  
KINGSTONE



**W**hen the tide turned against the McCanns, the photogenic parents of a pretty little girl who went missing in Portugal, the public (and press) reaction was no different to the ugly lynch mobs of a past generation. The methods may have been different, but the response was frighteningly similar. The couple were guilty of killing their daughter. Good thing we don't have public hanging anymore.

Whatever happens now, Gerry and Kate are toast, even though they have started their fight-back campaign.

They say they will take their case all the way to the top, to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Somehow the fate of a little girl seems lost in the twist the story has taken.

This is a tragedy on a massive scale, most especially for the parents. It is a story that has gripped the whole of the UK, Europe and South Africa. An enormously tragic tale of Shakespearean proportions, which has taken a turn none of us could have anticipated.

The couple have morphed from grieving parents to prime suspects, and in the

process we have all become forensic experts. We knew that a strand of hair found in the boot of a car was Maddy's, and the sedatives with which they had drugged the child and accidentally killed her was evident in the DNA.

The proof that this perfect couple were hard-hearted murderers was so overwhelming. Otherwise, why did Kate wash that Cuddle Cat, what was she trying to conceal?

As further proof of her guilt, why didn't she cry? What kind of mother could she be? Then the Portuguese police sequestered Kate's diary. Like something out of Orwell's thought-police, it is alleged she found raising three children under the age of 4 problematic.

Maddy suffered from colic. Gerry sometimes left Kate alone to look after the kids, which stressed her out.

Those recorded diary entries must seem familiar to most mothers; presumably they are not called the terrible twos for nothing. Not only is Kate McCann a killer – almost worse, she is a bad mother. As we have decided she is not the perfect mother, she should be punished. No comment on Gerry's ability as a dad, however.

The McCanns remain innocent until proven guilty in our legal system. They may well have accidentally or intentionally murdered Madeleine or perhaps they are the grieving parents of a little girl who has disappeared. But the mud thrown at them

is likely to stick, no matter what.

You couldn't make this story up, but then it is typical of a certain style of journalism that the monster the McCanns legitimately created by drawing media attention on their campaign to find their daughter has begun to devour them. Although different, it happened to Princess Diana. It is a beast you can neither tame nor predict.

The press has seized upon this story for several reasons. It is a nightmare scenario that terrifies parents. It also makes good copy, and the press rightly wanted to highlight Maddy's disappearance; this is what people want to read.

Contrary to popular belief, you can't just write anything in most papers – there are legions of lawyers and laws of restraint.

Then there is the thin edge of the wedge where innuendo is written like fact, where private detectives do what they are paid to do, where people rifle through bins, sources will talk for a drink or a wink, the police are leakier than a submarine with screen doors, and some journalists are simply unethical.

In our primitive lust for blood, the real story has got lost, and it says a lot about us, too. Strip away that sophisticated veneer of a civilised population and our bear-baiting tendencies come out. Right now it's hard to know what's going on, but that doesn't seem to stop any of us from making a judgment.