

ABSTRACT

Title of the paper: The State vs Oscar Pistorius: a critical analysis of the court of public opinion.

Very little attention has been devoted to the public's opinion of media coverage of court cases despite extensive research on pretrial publicity (Fusco & Sabourin, 2012). This seems inexplicable since the court of public opinion has undergone a revolutionary makeover since the advent of the social media. These changes have seldom been more clearly reflected than in the reaction of the public and the media during the Oscar Pistorius trial.

On 3 March 2014, Oscar Pistorius, a leading South African runner, who competed at the Paralympic games and the 2012 Summer Olympics went on trial for the murder of his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. In the early morning of Thursday, 14 February 2013, Steenkamp was shot and killed by Pistorius at his Pretoria home. Pistorius said that he mistook her for an intruder. On 25 February 2014, the High Court in Pretoria ruled that the entire trial may be broadcast live via audio and that parts of the trial may be broadcast live via television, namely the opening and closing arguments, the testimony of consenting state witnesses, the judgment, and the sentencing if applicable. A large part of the trial was thus televised as reality television. Cyberspace was turned into a court of public opinion with Facebook and Twitter carrying millions of comments. Experts and laypersons enthusiastically participated in the debate in cyberspace.

The researcher conducted purposive sampling of tweets collected from the #Oscar Pistorius handle during the trial. He qualitatively compared the input from members of the formal media with those of citizen journalists. The results of this analysis are embedded in this paper.

- Fusco, N. M. & Sabourin, M. (2012). Public opinion on media presence in the courthouse. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, Vol.35(1), pp.35-42