

Te'o In Depth With Couric

Written by Sean Stires

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The court of public opinion may never get behind Manti Te'o. One by one, rational-minded people, who have bothered to look beyond initial “gotcha” journalism reports alleging Te'o's role in making up a girlfriend for publicity, have been able to sift through the fiction to find what appear to be the facts in the matter.

There are still many though, like hosts on CNN and Fox News alike, who sit on their TV pulpits and decree Te'o's guilt without really looking deeper at the details. However, the two in the media that have actually been able to speak with Te'o in the last week, ESPN's Jeremy Schaap and syndicated talk show host Katie Couric, both find Te'o's side of the story to be believable.

Couric's interview, which also included Te'o's father and mother, aired on her syndicated show “Katie” on Thursday after it was recorded on-camera Tuesday afternoon. Before the show hit the airwaves, Couric was a guest on “The Dan Patrick Show”, which airs on radio and DirecTV, to give some of her thoughts on what she saw and heard during the Te'o family interview.

“I think he did very well in the interview,” Couric told Patrick of Te'o. “I think it was incredibly compelling. I think he was very honest – honest about how this relationship unfolded. I don't think he concocted this hoax.”

The relationship in question is the one Te'o thought he was having with a woman he knew as “Lennay Kekua”. Consistent with his interview with Schaap, Te'o denied any involvement in

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making up the relationship, but did admit to perpetrating it even after he learned the truth when he received a call from what he thought was Kekua in early December.

“Katie, put yourself in my situation,” Te'o said to Couric. “This girl who I committed myself to died on September 12th. Now I get a phone call on December 6th saying that she's alive and then I'm going to be put on national TV (during the Heisman Trophy ceremony) two days later. What would you do?”

Couric then grilled Te'o on why he didn't immediately tell his coaches or someone about the truth of that call. Instead, he went on TV two days later at the Heisman ceremony and talked about losing both his grandmother and girlfriend to cancer.

“Part of me was saying ‘If you say that she's alive what would everybody think, what are you gonna tell everybody who followed you (and) who you've inspired. What are you gonna say,’” Te'o responded when Couric asked him if his thought process was ‘This is my story and I'm sticking to it’.

“At that time, December 8th, two days after I had just found out she's alive – as a 21-year old I wasn't ready for that. I didn't even tell my parents yet. I didn't tell anybody. The only one who knew was me. That's all and I felt I did not know who to turn to. I did not know who to tell. I did not know who to trust. It was a big thing for me and I was scared. That's the truth. I was just scared and I didn't know what to do.”

He also told the person he thought was Kekua that if she was alive to send him a picture with her holding a sign with that day's date on it. He received that photo of the woman he thought was Kekua. Te'o told his mother on Dec. 25 and his father the next day that he thought Kekua was still alive.

On the same day Te'o's interview with Couric aired, Ronaiah Tuiasosopo's lawyer admitted in a New York Daily News interview that his client impersonated Kekua while perpetrating the hoax on Te'o – even taking photos from the Facebook page of a woman he knows to use as Kekua while aiding the hoax.

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“It was Ronaiah as Lenny,” Milton Grimes, Tuiasosopo’s attorney said. “This wasn’t a prank to make to be having fun. It was establishing a communication with someone...it was a person (Tuiasosopo) with a troubled existence trying to reach out and communicate and have a relationship.”

Te’o told Couric he had a phone conversation with Tuiasosopo on Jan. 16 in which the former Notre Dame linebacker says his antagonist admitted to the hoax, but also told Te’o he thought he was helping him.

“On the same day that everybody else found out this situation I found out,” Te’o told Couric of how he finally realized the truth. “See, I got the call on December 6th saying that she was alive, and from Dec. 6th to

January 16

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my whole reality was that she was dead (but) now all of a sudden she was alive. At that time I didn’t know that it was just somebody’s prank.”

Te’o discredited the Deadspin report that claimed he and Tuiasosopo are related. He says the two had only spoken twice as far as he knew, because he was told that Tuiasosopo was Kekua’s cousin.

“I think that he’s not totally innocent in this in terms of how this story got out, but I do think he was victimized by this individual,” Couric said of how she believes Te’o was duped by Tuiasosopo.

The two biggest pieces of information Te’o provided in the interview with Couric were phone records of his conversations with “Kekua” as well as three voice mails “she” left on his cell phone.

Couric confirmed that she and her staff had examined Te’o’s phone records. She said during the interview that there were “dozens” of phone calls between Te’o and the phone number he knew as associated with Kekua. According to Couric, several of the calls lasted for hours.

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The first of the voice mails is from Kekua's first day of chemotherapy:

"Hi I'm just letting you know I got here and I'm getting ready for my first session and um just want to call you to keep you posted. I miss you, I love you. Bye ."

"It sounds like a girl, doesn't it," Te'o asked Couric after hearing the message.

The veteran TV news and talk show host responded "Yes it does."

Another accuses Te'o of another woman answering Te'o's phone while he was out of the room:

"I don't know who answered your phone and I don't care," the woman said dramatically with the sound of tears in her voice. "I swear on my life I'm trying (long pause and sounds of sobbing)...you made it clear what you want (more sobbing). Take care ."

The final message was left on Sept. 11 – the day before Kekua supposedly died:

"Hey babe I'm just calling to say goodnight. I love you. I know that you're probably doing homework or you're with the boys or (inaudible) but I just wanted to say I love you and goodnight and I'll be ok tonight. I'll do my best. Um, yeah so get your rest and I'll talk to you tomorrow. I love you so much Hun. Sweet dreams."

The voice on the recordings has the falsetto sound of a female voice. Tuiasosopo's lawyer confirmed in his interview that his client previously had both voice and acting training. He is a singer who was the president of high school drama club and auditioned for the NBC show "The Voice" as well.

Couric did not pull punches during her interview with Te'o. She asked the future NFL linebacker

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several hard hitting questions.

“One of the theories is you created this whole scenario to cover-up your sexual orientation. Are you gay,” she asked Te'o point blank.

“No,” Te'o said with a laugh. “Far from it...far from it,” he added with emphasis. “

Te'o had told his dad that he was going to meet Kekua while he was home for Christmas in 2011, but the meeting never took place. He told his father though that he actually did meet Kekua to “get my dad's approval”. The lie he told his father, Brian Te'o, helped indirectly perpetuate the lie later on when Brian recounted the meeting that never took place in interviews with media.

“I think the biggest lie that I'm sorry for is the lie that I told my dad,” Te'o said. “When I told dad when he asked me ‘hey did you see her’ and I said ‘yes I saw her’. Your biggest thing is to always get the approval of your parents.”

The broadcast veteran, who began her journalism career with the ABC News Bureau in Washington D.C. in 1979, also asked Te'o if he thought the story of his relationship with and death of Kekua helped him to a second-place finish in the Heisman Trophy race.

“I don't know,” Te'o responded. “I really don't know.”

“I think he was honest about his shortcomings in terms of being completely honest about the nature of the relationship,” Couric told Patrick. “I think he conceded he misled people after he knew that something was terribly wrong and the whole thing was just completely fishy.”

The bulk of the interview that aired featured mostly Couric in a one-on-one setting with Te'o, but his parents were present for the last few minutes of the show as well. All three Te'os were in tears as they spoke of the pain the whole episode has caused. Manti expressed remorse for the

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pain he has caused his parents, while his parents expressed grief for what their son has gone through.

"I would just say you hurt me," Te'o said when Couric asked what his message would be to Tuiasosopo if he could meet him face-to-face.

Couric told Dan Patrick both the story and interview were "fascinating". People were talking trash about him everywhere he turned, right," Couric responded. "I think that there was a lot of information out there, some of it inaccurate."

"I think he's a very naïve, very young 21-year old who is very dependent on his family," Couric surmised. "I think also, I have to say from what I gather from his account the person behind this was extraordinarily manipulative and incredibly, really almost weirdly intelligent about the way this was conducted."

Both sides of this compelling story are now available for public consumption. Those in the media who seem to most vehemently disbelieve the possibility that Te'o was not a part of the hoax, from Anderson Cooper to Bill O'Reilly, seem to be those who have the most to themselves gain by playing the role of devil's advocate.

"It's a very interesting lesson, I think, for journalists about this whole story," Couric told Patrick "The fact that it was never really investigated."

Those in the media who find Te'o's story credible are more and more the ones who are able to actually listen with an objective ear and put their cynicism aside. They would point out the flaws in the shoddy reporting last from Deadspin that masqueraded as journalism.

Meanwhile, the Coopers and O'Reillys of the world who sit on their bully pulpits and pass judgment without a hint of true objectivity appear to be doing so out of scorn. Unlike either Couric or Schaap, they of course did not land the interview.