
A Journalist's Role in Reporting Death and Dying

by Joann Byrd

The news media can play an important role in enabling individuals to make decisions about dying and death and in engaging the public in an informed and continuing discussion of the moral issues surrounding the end of our lives. The media should consider the moral dimensions of death and dying a regular news topic and approach its coverage with precision and impartiality. This essay offers a list of concepts and conundrums that the news media could cover to prepare readers, viewers and listeners to grapple with the complex ethical questions of the personal and public dilemmas.

There cannot be a more universal news story than death.

Once comfortable on the obituary pages or in reports of war and murder and disease, the story of the end of our lives has been getting steadily more complicated. Other news stories tell us why: contemporary medicine allows us more control over the timing of our deaths than ever before.

That, in turn, means death increasingly involves individuals in choices, tough choices that profoundly affect their own families and tough choices that guide the society in which we live and die. These are choices few of us are equipped to make, or help make, with confidence. We need information about medical and technical possibilities to choose for ourselves or others and to help settle public policy. But importantly, choosing also requires a sophisticated level of moral reasoning and imagination—often when the decision maker is under extreme stress. The news media have a significant role to play in helping their readers, viewers and listeners grapple with these moral components of a story that affects every one of us.

The media are not obligated to help individuals prepare for their own decisions, nor to enhance the public discourse by helping those individuals participate thoughtfully. But the news media can find a place in important public policy discussions, and be truly useful to readers by pursuing the serious moral implications surrounding death and dying. Newspapers and television broadcasts are cheap, widely available and well suited to acting as vehicles for public discussion. Journalists are, by training and practice, adept at translating complex subjects into language that can be grasped and applied by people with a range of education, experience and interests.

The story of death and dying is one everyone can see as her own potential story. And the public apparently wants to read about the subject: when Derek Humphry's suicide manual, *Final Exit*, was published in 1991, it became a best-seller in the first week.

The media obviously should keep on reporting the developments that produce and surround these issues: new technologies and new discoveries, court cases and rulings, ballot initiatives, Jack Kevorkian's assisted suicide challenges and similar news events. This coverage keeps at least the factual components of the story before the public and can deepen the civic dialogue by emphasizing the moral consequences entailed by each.

But for the media to be truly valuable in so difficult and meaningful a discussion, news outlets must take on death and dying as an enterprise story. Not waiting for courts to rule or disabled patients to demand aid in dying, the media can get the moral issues on the public agenda by putting them on their own.

To really serve the public, the goals should be enabling and engaging: enabling by helping people to recognize and analyze the moral dilemmas; engaging by giving people the tools to enter the debate and by encouraging community discourse through resolution.

Death and dying issues inherently involve conflict (a necessary element of virtually every definition of news). But the media can help the community reach consensus by staying with the story after laying out the poles of the arguments. As public

Joann Byrd is ombudsman of the Washington Post. A newspaper reporter and editor for 36 years, she is developing a procedure for making ethical decisions in newsrooms.

discussion unfolds, the media can help to locate common ground and use explanatory news stories to keep the conversation going until it is settled. That coverage will inspire individuals to personal reasoning while they explore the social dilemmas.

Death is a story that also must resuscitate the notion of journalistic impartiality. People may base decisions about ending lives on what they read or hear from the media. With that much at stake, this

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is not a time to indulge a journalist's personal views. Moreover, it is time to be scrupulously aware of assumptions and unexamined biases that may influence journalistic judgments.

The personal stories of patients thrust into public debates reveal that journalists find inspiration in individuals who die with grace and courage. Reporting in the nation's newspapers tends to champion both technical advances and patient autonomy when an individual refuses the use of such advances.

The political and social and economic stories likely are told—as may befit policies—in gross numbers and costs and micro-tradeoffs, and certainly may be informed by journalists' views of the appropriate ways to assign priorities and spend tax dollars.

Reporters and editors should systematically assure that all relevant views are expressed. Enabling, in the story of death and dying, requires walking readers and viewers through all the arguments and ramifications. Journalists need to allow readers to confront their beliefs and obligations when reading about these issues.

Credibility also requires respect for the deeply-held beliefs through which the audience will filter this reporting. It is incumbent on the journalist to explain the possibilities and the implications in a way that honors positions of, say, Roman Catholics, Muslims and Jews, but helps individuals to reflect on and/or reconcile their convictions with these challenges.

The complications and divisions of the debate also spawn a whole language of overlapping, ill-defined or value-laden terminology. To get the story to the public without confusion and subjectivity asks reporters and editors to eschew the jargon or define

it precisely. Such phrases as "death with dignity," "the right to die," "euthanasia," "life-support," "prolonging death," "terminal," "quality of life" and "sanctity of life" are as likely to fog the facts and the options as any of the medical and legal terms citizens have to translate in this arena. More, many of the terms carry subtle (and not-so-subtle) messages inappropriate when objectivity is an important goal.

Journalists can help engage their communities by arming individuals with the breadth of the debate and the intricacy of its fundamental parts. A well-informed, confident public will know these concepts and will have reflected, for themselves and their society, on these conundrums:

- How do we define *life* and *death*? When is medical treatment futile? (And how low a probability of success should trigger that declaration?)
- What do religious faiths and schools of philosophy mean by "sanctity of life"? What do we mean by "quality of life" and who can decide the acceptable quality for any individual? And further, how do the decisions of courts, legislatures or voters translate into statements about the value of human life, of autonomy, of suffering?
- How can we identify and weigh the views of the stakeholders in these life and death decisions? How do autonomy and paternalism work in this context, and what shades of meaning stretch between the two?
- How do we define active and passive euthanasia? What are the moral differences between withholding life support and withdrawing it? What are the dimensions of the debate over doctor-assisted suicide? Are requests for help in suicide ever rational? And what are the alternatives to such action?
- How much weight should individuals and societies give to the economic factors in long-term care? Are cost-benefit analyses a morally sufficient method for evaluating how money is spent? And how do decisions made about individuals—by courts, legislatures, voters—translate into statements about the value of human life, the value of autonomy, the value of suffering, and other pertinent measures?

A multitude of other topics will be suggested as the story of death and dying marches past the end of this century. Journalists will want to continually help readers and viewers track and analyze, for example, the slippery slopes and their limits, and the changing roles of health-care practitioners. Thou-

sands of years of philosophical values and religious faith intersect here with technological Future Shock. The choices surrounding death and dying require the best thinking each of us can do.

If ever there was a way for the news media to truly serve the public, authoritative and useful coverage of the moral dimensions of death and dying is it.

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