

**WRITE TO DEATH:
NEWS FRAMING OF
THE RIGHT TO DIE
CONFLICT, FROM
QUINLAN'S COMA
TO KEVORKIAN'S
CONVICTION**

Elizabeth Atwood Gailey

PRAEGER

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Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Atwood-Gailey, Elizabeth.

Write to death : news framing of the right to die conflict, from Quinlan's coma to Kevorkian's conviction / Elizabeth Atwood Gailey.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-275-97713-7 (alk. paper)

1. Euthanasia. 2. Euthanasia—Social aspects. 3. Right to die. 4. Right to die—Social aspects. I. Title.

R726.A89 2003

179.7—dc21 2002037057

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2002037057

ISBN: 0-275-97713-7

First published in 2003

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Richard, Glen, Mom, Barbara, Nancy, Billy, and the rest of the clan.
Without you none of it matters.

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PREFACE

In talking to academic colleagues, students, friends, and casual acquaintances about this book, I have been struck repeatedly by the intense interest the topic of euthanasia generates. Perhaps this stems in part from the taboo that still constrains public discourse on mortality in the United States, a nation renowned for its disavowal of death (see, e.g., Gorer 1965; Becker 1963; Aries 1974, 1981). Of course, the issue's resonance may also reflect the personal stake individuals have in finding solutions for themselves or relatives forced to confront the exigencies of medicalized death and dying. Or it may simply be that people feel compelled to examine and resolve some of the agonizing philosophical contradictions that plague this issue—including their innate reverence for life versus the universally unwelcome prospect of an expensive and protracted “technologized” death. Whatever its genesis, the public's keen interest in euthanasia appears to cut across boundaries of age, class, gender, and ethnicity, tapping into enduring religious, ethical, and cultural beliefs.

It is not only euthanasia itself that attracts unusual attention, however. The news media's role in framing the debate over the “right to die” proves almost equally compelling. Americans, it seems, have a solid grasp of the pervasive influence of the mainstream media, which function both as society's central storytellers and its major purveyors of “mimetic capital”—the set of images used to render “material existence meaningful, comprehensible, resonant” (Greenblatt 1992, 6, 36). Even casual news consumers realize that the press does far more than alert and inform us about social problems, such as the conflict over euthanasia. The news media play a vital role in the social construction of social issues by calling attention to (or marginalizing) them, by labeling them “problems,” by authorizing and legitimating particular versions of their histories and causes, and by encasing them within symbolic cognitive structures—or “frames”—that advance particular interpretations and policy solutions.

Nowhere is this process more evident—nor more worthy of scrutiny—than in news stories pertaining to the end of life, that most mysterious, unsettling, and therefore symbolically weighted, of human passages. Like the abortion conflict preceding it, as well as embryo research, cloning, genetic mapping, and the string of other controversial technologies that have followed it, the struggle over a “right to die” has raised some of the most searing, contentious, and perplexing questions faced by modern societies. A small sample of these include:

- Does the nation’s commitment to individual autonomy and its desire to prevent suffering at the end of life justify social and legal recognition of a right to die—including access to lethal drugs administered by a doctor?
- What rights, if any, should be granted to the state, medical professionals, and families to truncate the lives of individuals too ill to authorize this act themselves?
- Does the state’s interest in preserving and allocating finite economic, social, and medical resources justify its sanctioning of physician-assisted suicide (PAS) for dying or seriously incapacitated individuals?
- If doctors and medical institutions are to be empowered by the state to assist in their patients’ suicides, how might the poor, minorities, and members of other traditionally disadvantaged groups be protected from potential abuses of this power?

As these questions make clear, few social conflicts have more potential to disrupt the moral order than the battle over euthanasia and PAS, which pits American society’s vigorous technological imperative and innate impulse to prolong life against its finite economic and medical resources and fundamental commitment to individual autonomy and human rights. As ground zero for these overlapping and contradictory forces, euthanasia news stories published in the national, mainstream press offer a window into a cultural realm “where negotiations over core ideologies, values, and myths surface and make themselves available for evaluation and analysis” (Fox 1977).

It is just such evaluation and analysis that is at the center of *Write to Death*, which examines national print news coverage of euthanasia within the context of the key historical, social, and economic forces giving rise to the right-to-die (RTD) debate. More than most social problems, the outcome of the struggle over euthanasia will crucially impact *all* Americans. Fallout from the policy decisions and public attitudes shaped in part by news stories about the controversy will be imprinted on the lives of elderly, severely disabled, and incompetent Americans well into the future. Unfortunately, if history is any judge, legalization of PAS, in particular, will result in certain groups in society—most likely women, minorities, the physically and mentally disabled, the poor—finding themselves confronting the darker side of the nation’s sweeping new “right” to choose suicide.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to a number of individuals whose generosity and assistance helped make this book possible. Next to the encouragement and patience of my husband Richard, the book benefited most from the support of Dr. Kittrell Rushing, an accomplished media historian and my department head at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga (UTC). Since I arrived at UTC to teach media studies courses six years ago, Kit has gone out of his way to provide course releases, technical assistance, and a sympathetic ear when my efforts to juggle the book with my teaching and advising duties threatened to overwhelm. Because this book began as my doctoral dissertation at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville, I also owe Drs. Dorothy Bowles and Paul Ashdown a great deal of credit for their guidance and personal mentorship during that formative experience. Other colleagues at UTC also played important roles in the book's completion, including: Dr. Karen Adsit, whose expertise in media technologies has helped shape my research and teaching in so many ways; Dr. Betsy Alderman, whose support and people skills have guided me through rough shoals more times than I can say; my good friend Dr. Laura Lovett, whose affection and advice sustained me; and our Department secretary, Kelly Griffin, whose kindness and offers to help meant more than she realized.

I am also deeply grateful for the competence and flexibility of my Greenwood Press editors, including Michael Hermann, who shepherded the book through its early stages with grace and humor, and Bobbie Goettler, whose copyediting expertise and professionalism made working with her an authentic pleasure. Finally, I'd like to thank my students, whose interest in the media and love of ideas help fuel my scholarly work, my son Glen, whose honesty and character remain a central source of inspiration for me, and my sisters Nancy and Barbara, whose faith in me infuses my life with warmth, energy, and emotional strength.

INTRODUCTION

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem,
and that is suicide.
Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering
the fundamental question of philosophy.
— Camus 1955

Before twentieth-century advances in technology dramatically altered the capacity to extend life, the concepts of “death” and “rights” were seldom, if ever, coupled. Yet in recent decades, in industrialized countries around the globe, the notion of a “right to die” has attained widespread cultural currency. In the United States, catchphrases such as “living wills,” “death with dignity,” and “quality of life” have become embedded in the popular vernacular. And public approval of both passive and active euthanasia¹ has spiraled upward since the *Quinlan* case galvanized public and media attention in the mid-1970s.² By the dawn of the twenty-first century, polls showed close to 75 percent of United States citizens in favor of some form of euthanasia (Neergaard 2000), and by 2001 fully 65 percent of American adults approved of PAS (Taylor 2002).³ In contrast, only 37 percent of the population in 1947 and only about half of those polled in 1977 expressed support for some form of euthanasia (Pugliese 1993; Hamil-Luker and Smith 1998).⁴

This broad public mandate for a “right to die” is striking not only for the swiftness with which traditional barriers to euthanasia appear to have crumbled, but in terms of the power and prestige of the institutions allied against it. Opponents of PAS object to it for reasons varying from its perceived corruption of the doctor-patient relationship to its violation of religious law. In addition to opposition from the American Medical Association (AMA)—arguably the nation’s most visible and recognizable symbol of medical authority—PAS has been denounced by virtually all Evangelical Christian denominations, the Roman Catholic church, and Orthodox Jewish, Greek, and Islamic faiths, among others. Despite the enormous reach and authority of these institutions, their

efforts to mobilize public sentiment against PAS have been notably ineffectual in the United States.

Clearly, a significant shift has taken place in public attitudes toward individual autonomy over the time and circumstances of death and, more broadly, in the fundamental meaning of what constitutes a “good death” in American society. This shift gives rise to a number of compelling questions, the most intriguing of which relates to the public’s near-sweeping endorsement a “right to die”: How, in less than two decades, did the central question in the euthanasia debate evolve from, “Should we allow comatose patients to be disconnected from artificial life-support systems?” to “Should we allow doctors to take proactive steps—even injecting lethal drugs—to end the lives of terminally ill and comatose patients?” As newspaper columnist Ellen Goodman (1997) notes, “Somewhere along the way the right-to-die movement went from asking about stopping treatment to asking for a doctor’s help in dying” (p. A27).

Although a number of routes might be pursued to investigate the questions raised by this issue, the approach adopted in *Write to Death* involves tracking the role of the *news media*—among our culture’s most potent instruments of legitimization—in conditioning public understanding of and consensus on the euthanasia conflict. All human societies erect socially approved “firewalls” against the reality of death, including standards and rituals designed to mitigate the existential trauma and uncertainty associated with mortality. In the modern era of “technologized” death, however, the task of designating the norms associated with a death has grown infinitely more complex. In post-capitalist societies like the United States, knowledge about life’s end, including the meanings and interpretations attached to it, is no longer inscribed and codified primarily in religious and healing rites, the arts, or even legal rulings—but increasingly in mass media discourse.

SCOPE AND PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Given the gravity of the euthanasia conflict, its serious long-term implications for the health and well-being of Americans, and the pitched discursive battle waged between pro- and anti-euthanasia forces during the last quarter of the twentieth century, it is surprising that news coverage of euthanasia, PAS, and the right-to-die (RTD) movement has failed to attract adequate scholarly attention and analysis. Whereas scores of euthanasia-related books have been published over the past several decades, none provide more than a cursory examination of the news media’s role in constructing and conditioning popular perceptions of this ethically and technically complex issue. Meanwhile, the few researchers who have published peer-reviewed journal articles exploring some aspect of euthanasia news coverage have focused narrowly on Dr. Jack Kevorkian, ignored news coverage of euthanasia prior to 1990, and/or neglected to draw on and integrate historical, ideational, and other contextual material into their findings (see, e.g., Kalwinsky 1988; and Kenny 2000). Despite its inevitability, death and its attendant rituals are never culturally neutral; they take place and assume prominence within specific historical, economic, social,

ideological, and political contexts—all of which must be examined *in tandem* with analysis of news media coverage. This is nowhere more important than in scholarly investigations of divisive, multilayered, and profoundly consequential issues such as the euthanasia controversy.

Write to Death seeks to overcome these and other deficiencies in euthanasia research by situating its analysis of euthanasia news stories published over more than two decades within the context of the key socio-cultural and historical factors serving as catalysts for mobilization of the RTD movement in the 1970s. The period selected for news analysis includes the “flash point” of the debate—the interval between Karen Ann Quinlan’s coma in the mid-1970s and Dr. Jack Kevorkian’s final, nationally televised “mercy killing” and subsequent conviction for murder in the late 1990s. Mass communications research suggests that the news shapes audience cognition in multifaceted ways (e.g., Katz 1980; Roberts and Maccoby 1985). News reports transmit information to the public on key issues and events; they set public and policy agendas by singling out particular social problems as salient (e.g., McCombs and Shaw; 1972); and news stories move some issues to center stage while backgrounding or warehousing others (see, e.g., Gitlin 1980; Lang and Lang 1983). These functions reflect only the outer stratum of news media influence, however. Mainstream news also serves as a chief cultural conditioner and circulator of values and beliefs (see, e.g., Carey 1975, 1988; Hall 1979). Reporters not only filter which and when, but how information is conveyed—the mix of images, metaphors, anecdotes, sources, and other discursive elements used in the construction of social problems for public consumption (see, e.g., Schudson 1978; Gitlin 1980; Gamson and Lasch 1983; Snow and Benford 1988; Entman and Rojecki 1993). In the process, news reports do more than highlight the significance of specific events and issues. They reinforce, crystallize, and alter collective knowledge about pressing social problems and their solutions. They legitimate or delegitimize specific ideologies, individuals, and interpretations. They manufacture consent (Chomsky and Herman 1988). And they cultivate general perceptions about social reality (see, e.g., Noelle-Neumann 1974; Gerbner et al. 1978; Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979).

The threshold task of this book, then, is to illuminate some of the major ways in which journalists and editors—while cloaking themselves in claims of objectivity—deployed cultural symbols in the service of ideology in their coverage of the euthanasia controversy. The book takes as its starting point the notion that deep-seated cultural values and beliefs reside in news texts and are accessible through analysis of the language, images, and other discursive symbols journalists use to encapsulate them. Moreover, it assumes these symbolic structures to embody specific ideologies (Fiske 1987). Drawing on examples from news articles on euthanasia published in four high-circulation, mainstream, national news media sources—*Newsweek*, *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *The New York Times*—over more than two decades, the book amasses an array of discursive evidence to illustrate how the national press systematically promoted pro-euthanasia views and marginalized or omitted anti-euthanasia frames.⁵ Meanwhile, it demonstrates how journalists’ framing

selections and emphases implied the appropriateness of *particular* policy decisions on euthanasia and, in the process, advanced new definitions of and prescriptions for achieving a “good death.” Another original contribution of this research involves the detection of the three major framing *stages* through which euthanasia coverage evolved during the period of analysis.

A second, related objective of *Write to Death* involves exploration of the complex dynamic between the news media, social movements, and social change. If, as Gurevitch and Levy (1985) assert, the news media serve as “a site on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality” (p. 19), the battle is joined fundamentally over news media “frames”—the “codes of emphasis, interpretation and presentation” journalists use in stories about social issues (O’Sullivan et al. 1994, 281). By analyzing the repeated images, representations, and messages found in euthanasia news narratives, some of the ways in which ideological positions are packaged, presented, and made palatable to news audiences become evident. As the most efficient means of packaging and disseminating ideology, news frames represent potent weapons in the symbolic struggle social movement activists wage over competing definitions and interpretations of social problems (Gamson 1992b, 67). As with all social movements, the contest between RTD and pro-life (PL) forces is fundamentally a battle over *cultural meanings*—the version of social reality activists wish the public and policymakers to view as “fact” (Wolfsfeld 1993). This book highlights the way in which the mainstream press intervened in this process by authorizing and dispensing particular cultural “truths” about euthanasia and PAS during the peak period of public attention and consideration of the issue.

A final purpose of this book, which adopts a cultural studies approach to news research, involves exploring the wealth of data on American cultural characteristics and trends contained within euthanasia-related news narratives. Among other advantages, analysis of euthanasia news frames offers a rare glimpse into the social construction of public morality and social control. Just as abortion news stories embody the struggle over institutional versus individual control over women’s bodies and reproductive rights (see, e.g., Grindstaff 1994), news narratives about euthanasia bring into focus the cultural dimensions of the contest waged between individuals, medical institutions, and governmental agencies over control of the bodies of the aged, incompetent, severely disabled, and dying. Such stories convey information on subterranean fault lines, fissures, and contradictions in social beliefs and attitudes—sites where the seeds of social change are most likely to germinate and take root. Of particular relevance to scholars interested in the social construction of death and dying in America, these stories carry within them intelligence on evolving notions of what constitutes a good death in contemporary society. Although ideas on achieving a “good” or “bad” death vary across historical eras and cultures, the desire to avoid pain and suffering at the end of life—as well as the need for myths and narratives that render death and dying meaningful—are universal values. Indeed, Lifton (1979) describes the need to imbue death with meaning and a sense of continuity as “the central quest of human history” (393).

The creation of acceptable versions of a good death not only helps neutralize this most destabilizing of human experiences, but is considered crucial to the welfare and future viability of all social systems.

Media Construction of Social Problems and Movements

The news media analysis at the heart of this book draws on two distinct yet compatible theoretical and research strands: (1) a *cultural studies* approach that views the news media as a symbolic system that both structures and is structured by society (Hall 1977, 1990); and (2) *framing theory* (Goffman 1976), which provides insights on the media's role in the social construction of reality by wedding journalists' specific language selections to larger cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Inspired by what one scholar refers to as "the phenomenon of the idea," *Write to Death* is broadly concerned with the process through which ideas on the appropriateness of euthanasia and PAS came into being and attained cultural currency in the last decades of the twentieth century (Kral 1994, 245). To investigate this puzzle, the book examines how the debate over legalized euthanasia was "framed"—or organized cognitively to support specific interpretations and perceptions—during the period when the issue loomed largest in national debate.

A Cultural Approach to News Analysis

Like all cultural experiences, death and dying are attended by a "relevant public discourse"—that is, "a particular set of ideas and symbols that are used in the process of constructing meaning" (Gamson 1988b, 165). Of all the ideational and symbolic forms used to represent reality, *language* is the most critical. Aside from facilitating human interaction and cohering individuals into communities, language "enables the manufacture and maintenance of history and culture" (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1988, 21). As Hall's (1982) phrase, "The world has to be *made to mean*" suggests, language—including that circulated in news media discourse—plays a dominant role in the construction of social reality. Cherished American values and myths are vital components in the lexicon of symbols reporters use to explain and interpret social phenomena. The routine use in news stories of familiar and widely accepted "truths" or commonplace understandings both increases their credibility and interpretive power and functions ideologically. The news, in other words, not only spotlights specific problems, but situates them structurally and contextually in ways that aid particular judgments and interpretations. In this way news stories, which draw on widely recognized cultural symbols and ideas, may be seen to play a major role in establishing, reaffirming, and reproducing culture.

News Framing Theory

Framing theory is among the few perspectives available to mass media scholars that approaches news as a cultural resource journalists and news consumers use to constitute social reality (see, e.g., Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980; Edelman 1988). Functioning both as theory and analytical

technique, framing is particularly useful for the study of the mass mediated symbols, images, values, and definitions journalists and editors use to promote particular views of social reality, including construction of the euthanasia debate and popular ideas related to achieving a “good death.” Although framing theory has been applied in a confusing array of contexts and academic disciplines (see, e.g., Entman 1993), researchers employing the approach generally share the fundamental notion of a frame as “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively highlighting certain information” (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). Applied to news, framing theory suggests that the influence of frames results not so much from specific statements intended to persuade, but from the “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin 1977, 7). In Foucauldian terms, news frames, like all discursive practices, establish “regimes of truth . . . the rules and standards by which individuals define what is good and bad; reasonable and unreasonable; rational, irrational, and non-rational” (Foucault 1973).

At this point it is fruitful to provide a brief explanation of how news frames are thought to operate cognitively. At the most fundamental level, news frames provide audiences with cues about the salience of events and issues, as well information on the best way to decipher and categorize social phenomena. One way in which they do so is by helping audiences process and organize new or unfamiliar social data into pre-existing cultural “scripts.” By linking novel information with prior meanings, memories, and associations, news frames build bridges between the uncommon and the everyday, the known and the unknown, the prosaic and the peculiar. Frames, then, direct audiences to “imagine the new in terms of the old” (Covert 1992). This process is effective because, as Donati (1992) reminds us, “Cognition is nothing more than recognition, and people make sense of things by ‘re-cognizing’ them as elements of a meaningfully ordered world. The consequence, in a sense, is that nothing can be perceived which is not known already” (p. 141).

The impact of a given news story frame has been found to intensify under certain circumstances, as when counterframes with opposing meanings and ideological messages are omitted or marginalized (see, e.g., Zucker 1978; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Framing scholars have also found that news frame influence is amplified when audiences have no direct experience or are unfamiliar with news issues, such as foreign affairs or in stories about highly technical and ethically complex social issues (Zucker 1978; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). As an ethical dilemma arising from advances in medical technology, as well as dramatic population growth and a host of other historical, religious, and social forces, the euthanasia debate may be among the most complex confronted by American news audiences.

The notion that audience members find certain frames more credible than others highlights the concept of “frame resonance,” a term signifying the capacity of a frame to “resonate with larger cultural themes” (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 6) or align with prevailing cultural perceptions, experiences,

and myths (Snow 1986; Snow and Benford 1988). As this suggests, the way in which readers process and accept frames is contingent on cultural preconditioning. In Schudson's (1989) words, "What is 'resonant' is not a matter of how 'culture' connects to individual 'interests' but a matter of how culture connects to interests that are themselves constituted in a cultural frame" (169). Compounding this effect, news frames are structured in a way that guides audiences toward a "dominant" or "preferred" reading that constrains alternative meanings (see, e.g., Morley 1980; Sigman and Fry 1985; Radway 1984; Carragee 1991). Hence, although frames are theoretically "polysemic"—open to multiple interpretations (Barkin and Gurevitch 1987; Newcomb and Hirsch 1984; Fiske 1987)—readers' interpretive freedom is rather rigidly circumscribed both by their cultural preconditioning and the cognitive structure of frames themselves, which promote particular meanings and discourage others (Gergen and Semin 1990).

News Framing of Social Problems and Movements

The news analysis presented in *Write to Death* benefits from the work of a number of framing scholars, including Gamson and Lasch (1983), who identified five "symbolic devices" and three "reasoning devices" that signal the presence of frames.⁶ Also fundamental to news framing research and theory are Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) conceptualization of news frames as the core of "interpretive packages"—clusters of harmonious ideas about a social problem that aid in its interpretation, including the formulation of causes and solutions.

Gamson and colleagues also provide valuable insights on *framing stages*—the way in which dominant news media frames change over time to integrate the emergence of new information and/or events into an ongoing conflict. Charting longitudinal changes in dominant euthanasia news frames represents an important focus of this book, which seeks insights on the news media's role in the dramatic shift in public attitudes toward euthanasia during the past few decades. Among the many additional studies providing guidance on framing stages, the work of Silverstein (1992) and Condit (1990) are particularly useful. In Silverstein's study of news framing of the animal-rights conflict, she found that news coverage grew "increasingly respectful" and abundant as time progressed, reflecting growing acceptance of activists' terms and definitions of the debate. Condit, who investigated changes in abortion rhetoric over time, found that both pro- and anti-abortion forces involved in the early stages of the debate were hampered by a lack of symbols, terms, relevant cultural experiences, and other cognitive links used in frames to make sense of novel issues and events. These studies have obvious relevance to this book's longitudinal study of the euthanasia dispute, which not only erupted full-scale with Quinlan's coma in 1975, but presented reporters with an array of challenges, not the least of which was the unspoken taboo against the publication of graphic details of the suffering associated with advanced age and death. The issue's densely complex medical, religious, sociological, legal, and