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Domestic 'Zealotry' and Press Discourse: Kevorkian's Euthanasia Incident

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Abstract

The manner in which press outlets cover the convergence of the explicitly sensational and the explicitly ideological holds political and social implications. Does a startling or shocking domestic incident that the US press labels as zealotry catalyze the nation's news outlets to explore a wide range of views about the issues involved and their public relevance? This article addresses this matter by examining print media coverage of a videotaped euthanasia that was broadcast by the popular news magazine program *60 Minutes*. The findings raise questions about the ability of incidents such as these to push the mainstream press to look beyond zealotry to the social context surrounding it.

Keywords

controversy, criminal, domestic news, euthanasia, ideology, medicine, sensationalism, zealotry

Disciplines

Broadcast and Video Studies | Communication | Critical and Cultural Studies | Health Communication | Journalism Studies | Mass Communication | Medicine and Health Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

Domestic 'zealotry' and press discourse: Kevorkian's euthanasia incident

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The manner in which press outlets cover the convergence of the explicitly sensational and the explicitly ideological holds political and social implications. Does a startling or shocking domestic incident that the US press labels as zealotry catalyze the nation's news outlets to explore a wide range of views about the issues involved and their public relevance? This article addresses this matter by examining print media coverage of a videotaped euthanasia that was broadcast by the popular news magazine program *60 Minutes*. The findings raise questions about the ability of incidents such as these to push the mainstream press to look beyond zealotry to the social context surrounding it.

KEY WORDS: *controversy, criminal, domestic news, euthanasia, ideology, medicine, sensationalism, zealotry*

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines a zealot as 'a fanatically committed person' – that is, 'a person possessed by excessive zeal for and uncritical attachment to a cause or position'. It characterizes zealotry as an incident that reflect a person's 'excessive and uncritical commitment' to an idea or ideal. When contemporary researchers have investigated coverage of zealots and zealotry by American media, their work has often centered on 'terrorist' activities that take place outside the USA (see, for example, Alali and Byrd, 1994; Wiemann, 1994). Their analyses have spoken to the media's reflection of US government foreign policy as well as to the relative lack of interest in international news by the American press (Picard and Alexander, 1991; Martin and Hiebert, 1990).

This study, by contrast, asks questions about zealotry that takes place closer to home and that raises domestic political and social concerns. Press historians and sociologists have confronted the issue of domestic zealotry through explorations of ways in which the mainstream press has constructed individuals and groups as zealots, marginalizing them and their actions in the process. Missing from these discussions, however, is an understanding of the extent to which zealous actions function as critical incidents that encourage a broadening of press discussions of social issues underlying the events.

Does a startling or shocking domestic incident that the American press labels as zealotry catalyze the nation's news outlets to explore a wide range of views about the issues involved and their public relevance? The question reflects on a gamut of bizarre events, from the 'Unabomber's' booby-trapped packages to the exploits of the Ku Klux Klan to cyber sabotage, that individuals and groups carry out at least partly to rivet public attention to their political cause. More generally, the question addresses an enduring issue about press coverage itself. It asks whether journalistic storytelling's basic impulse is to narrow or expand discourse on contentious domestic sociopolitical issues.

We addressed this matter by examining print media coverage of a videotaped euthanasia that was broadcast by the popular news magazine program *60 Minutes*. Jack Kevorkian, a

physician whom journalists had long dubbed a zealot, had carried out the killing on a patient with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) disease, taped it with the patient's permission, and offered it to the CBS show. Kevorkian said he did this to force the legitimacy of euthanasia and assisted suicide onto the public agenda. We wanted to know whether it did, and how press discussions of euthanasia or assisted suicide changed as a result of the broadcast. Using those terms as key words we conducted a content analysis on a large random sample of US newspapers during the month before, during, and after the broadcast.

The results were startling. We found that the broadcast killing did spark a large rise in articles that mentioned euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide. The increase in articles did not, however, lead to a broadened discussion of bioethical or legal issues surrounding Kevorkian's actions. Instead, the articles framed Kevorkian's activities overwhelmingly as a crime-and-personality story. Prosecutors and defense attorneys far outnumbered sources such as physicians, nurses, ethicists, patients and advocacy group representatives who could shed light on other meanings of the incident. Moreover, the crime-and-personality coverage of Kevorkian's act muted the already slight coverage of philosophical, social and political issues surrounding euthanasia and assisted suicide that we found in the weeks before the broadcast. Diminished attention to these topics remained weeks after the videotape first aired. The findings raise questions about the ability of incidents such as these to push the mainstream press to look beyond zealotry to the social context surrounding it.

Literature review

Many writers have noted that the ideology of mainstream news in the US is inherently conservative. It should come as no surprise, then, that throughout the nation's history mainstream press outlets have tended to dub as 'fanatic' individuals and groups that have been fiercely committed to rapid or unusual forms of political or social change. Nerone (1994) and Solomon (1991) underscore this dynamic in descriptions of the ways in which major American newspapers treated abolitionists, labor unions and suffragists during their formative periods. Nerone notes, for example, that 'mainstream [press] forces cherished an image of abolitionists as wild subversives', who exploited taxpayer-funded services such as the post office for demonic, propagandistic ends. Writing about the growing labor movement of the early 20th century, Nerone describes how *The Los Angeles Times* 'appealed constantly to the image of the sober industrious worker and demonized unionists as the opposite: vicious, lazy, jealous'. Solomon reveals a similar dynamic with respect to newspaper coverage of turn-of-the-century suffragettes.

Explorations of mainstream press conflicts with social movements during the 1970s provide evidence that the pattern of marginalization continued to the modern era. Gitlin (1980) captures this process nicely in his description of the way reporters framed Students for a Democratic Society as a dangerous organization and in the process delegitimized its radical ideological platform against the Vietnam War. Tuchman (1978) suggests that *The New York Times* treated the 'women's liberation' movement in a similarly marginalized way. She shows how female workers within the *The New York Times* were able to expand and normalize coverage of political aspects of women's lives, if not of the actual women's lib groups themselves.

These studies are important for detailing the way in which mainstream journalism has often reflected the interests of society's establishment when dealing with people whose world views appear to pose a threat to middle-of-the-road values and politics (see Gans, 1979). At the same time, the studies do not address a key related question: having dubbed persons or groups as

fanatic and their action as dangerous, do mainstream press outlets go further? That is, do they use events that the fanatics stage to explore the underlying social issues and present a range of (presumably more socially acceptable) solutions?

Broader scholarly literature on journalism also does not point us toward clear-cut answers to these questions. Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) state that ‘there is a growing consensus that contemporary reporting has altered [the definition of news] to deemphasize events in favor of news analysis’. They concede, however, that most conclusions about increased analysis in news have centered on political reporting. In their own research, they found increased analytical coverage of crime, accidents, and employment in three major newspapers through the 20th century. The categories in that research, though, did not allow the authors to explore the extent, nature, or depth of the social interpretation.

It is very much the extent, nature, and depth of social interpretation that concern us when it comes to the journalistic construction of zealotry. Incendiary incidents that journalists define as fanatical uniquely merge ‘sensational’ or ‘criminal’ deeds with the perpetrators’ own presentation of political reasons for the behavior. Moreover, from 1960s bra-burners to the Unabomber, many people who perform socially provocative acts have said that they carry them out at least in part to garner press (and public) attention to the conditions that led to the actions.

How mainstream press outlets cover this convergence of the explicitly sensational and the explicitly ideological itself holds contemporary political and social implications. A pattern of press discussion of the problems that ignited such acts might mean that ideologically committed plane hijackers, hunger-strikers, bombers and other extremists have a good chance for success in their publicity aims despite being personally branded as zealots. But even if mainstream press outlets avoid becoming direct mouthpieces for the ‘zealots’ interests, they might still find in their actions an opportunity to explore many facets of a social problem in front of a large, interested audience. The question recalls Walter Lippmann’s (1922) metaphor about the press only intermittently shining its light on various aspects of society. When it comes to extremist incidents that rivet societal and press attention, we wanted to know whether the press’ basic impulse was to broaden or to narrow the sociopolitical beam.

The case of Kevorkian

The controversy surrounding Jack Kevorkian presented a good opportunity to investigate this topic. He entered into the debate about physician-assisted suicide in the late 1980s when he wrote a series of articles endorsing the idea that as part of their duty to relieve pain and suffering physicians should assist those requesting suicide. In 1990 he helped Janet Atkins, an Oregon woman who had been diagnosed as suffering from early stage Alzheimer’s disease, to commit suicide. Kevorkian decided to help Atkins carry out her suicide in Pontiac, Michigan because the state of Michigan had no explicit law banning assisted suicide. He was brought to trial for his role in the Atkins death but was released when the judge found insufficient evidence to prosecute him for murder (see Robertson, 1999; Betzold, 1998).

During the 1990s Kevorkian remained active as a proponent of assisted suicide and as an individual who assisted those, both terminally ill and not, in committing suicide. He publicly admitted involvement in 50 deaths and has privately stated (to one of the authors) that he assisted persons in dying in at least another 50 instances. His license as a physician was removed as a result of his suicide work.

On the *60 Minutes* broadcast of 22 November 1998, Kevorkian stated that he had become frustrated at the failure of his campaign to achieve a right to assistance in suicide for any person

who requested it. ‘The issue’, he said, ‘has got to be raised to the level where it is finally decided’ (*60 Minutes* transcript, 1998). Consequently, he said, he decided to take a sensational next step. He would directly cause the death of a person who had requested help in dying and offer the opportunity to a national news organization to tape the act. He contacted *60 Minutes* producers, and they agreed to broadcast a tape in which he administers a lethal preparation to Youk with Youk’s agreement. The 22 November program aired the tape to an audience of millions. Because he had not only assisted the death but had undertaken the key action that caused it, Oakland County (Michigan) district attorneys charged Kevorkian with murder. Several months later he was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to prison, his location as of this writing.

The method

We investigated whether and how Jack Kevorkian’s 22 November 1998 appearance on *60 Minutes* affected mainstream US newspapers’ discussion of euthanasia and assisted suicide.¹ We examined newspaper coverage of these topics from 15 October 1998 through 14 January 1999. To take into account any disclosure of the tape’s contents to the press before 22 November, we considered that the month of broadcast began on 15 November. (As it turned out, there was no such prior disclosure.) For article sampling purposes, we divided our time span into three months—15 October–14 November; 15 November–14 December; 15 December–14 January.

Using the Lexis–Nexis full-text database of large and medium circulation US newspapers, we retrieved all articles that mentioned *euthanasia* or *assisted suicide* in the headline or body during that period; the number totaled 1756 in 129 papers. Because we noted that most of the articles clustered around the period of the broadcast, we were concerned that choosing a random sample directly from the population of 1756 pieces would not yield enough articles from the four weeks before and after that time. Consequently, we decided to randomly choose the same number of articles – 200 – from each of the four weeks. In the end, 14 had to be discarded, and we exceeded our sample for the second period by 10 articles. In total, then, 586 randomly selected articles comprised our sample.

We designed our analytical instrument to assess whether these articles mentioned issues that lie at the center of contemporary discussions of euthanasia and assisted suicide among health policy professionals (see, for example, Caplan, 1998, 1995; Uhlman, 1998). These professionals include bioethicists, health care analysts, legislators, judges, physicians, patients, and patient advocates. The broad issues were media ethics (whether *60 Minutes* was correct in airing it); crime/murder; humane alternatives to euthanasia and assisted suicide; legislative activities; public opinion or polling; critiques of euthanasia and assisted suicide; personalities of those involved; and economics.

We also noted the presence of specific, key topics connected to the larger ones. When it came to the legislative models, coders noted the following: whether the assisted suicide laws of Holland or the state of Oregon came up and whether the paragraph mentioned safeguards or competency tests regarding the action. *Humane alternatives* included a range of activities, from withholding treatment to pain control to spiritual/religious support to hospice care to additional treatments. Mention of critiques of euthanasia or assisted suicide related to five major points that are emphasized in the bioethical literature (Caplan, 1998, 1995; Nuland, 1994; Uhlman, 1998). They included moral/religious prohibitions to euthanasia or assisted suicide, concern that it undermines trust in physicians, belief that it violates medical ethics, concern that it encourages killing people who cannot afford to pay costs associated with long illnesses, and the ‘slippery

slope' argument. That is the belief that making euthanasia and assisted suicide lawful even under narrow circumstances will inevitably lead to a broadening of the activities in immoral ways unintended by those initially legalizing it.

Our unit of analysis was an article. Eight coders first noted basic identifying information about each article we gave them. The coders went on to determine whether the article focused on or just mentioned euthanasia or assisted suicide. They noted the existence of the major issues of the headline and lead paragraph. They then looked for the major and specific topics in the body of the article paragraph by paragraph. In doing that, they checked a box on a grid for each paragraph in which the subject showed up. The resulting number of paragraphs comprised a measure of the intensity in which the article mentioned the topic. In the final section of the instrument, coders noted paragraph by paragraph what kinds of people reporters quoted or cited in their discussions about euthanasia and assisted suicide. Were they ethicists, AMA spokespeople, MDs, nurses, end-of-life patients, their relatives, police, judges, prosecutors, legislators, *60 Minutes* producers, Kevorkian himself, Thomas Youk, members of the pro-euthanasia Hemlock society, religious spokespeople, science scholars, or humanities scholars?

The eight coders who worked on the project were graduate students in the University's bioethics program. We told them that we were studying press coverage of euthanasia around the time of the Kevorkian euthanasia episode, which had happened only weeks earlier. Before coding the articles in earnest, they went through three weeks of intensive training with the investigators during which time a number of categories in the instrument were reshaped and decision rules clarified for reliable coding. By the end of the training period, intercoder reliability averaged 0.89.

Findings

To establish a good view of the treatment of euthanasia and assisted suicide in the US press before, during, and after the airing of Kevorkian's tape, it is useful to proceed in three steps. First we present an overview of all the articles to give a sense of what US newspapers offered readers about euthanasia and assisted suicide from mid-October 1998 through mid-January 1999. Then we ask whether mention of Jack Kevorkian in these articles during any of the months was linked to a certain type of press discourse. Finally, we look at similarities and differences across the three months to establish a sense of whether what happened on the *60 Minutes* program influenced the nature of articles about euthanasia and assisted suicide.

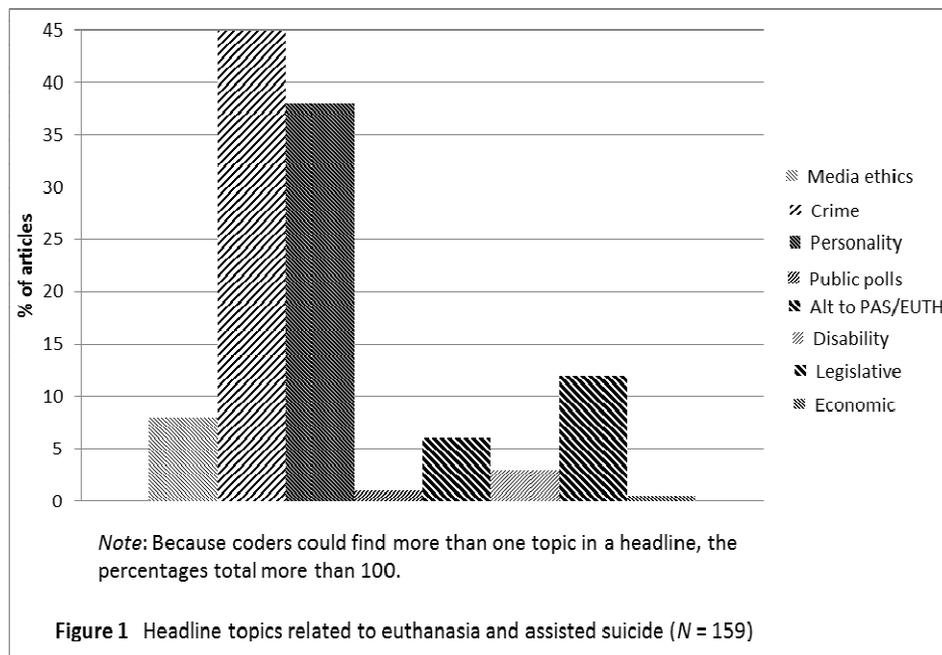
The sample as a whole

As noted earlier, an exploration of the Lexis–Nexis database found 1756 articles in 129 US newspapers that appeared from 15 October 1998 through 14 January 1999 and mentioned euthanasia or assisted suicide in the headline or body. The way in which the articles concentrated during the three four-week periods reflects the clamor that occurred around the *60 Minutes* broadcast: the period starting seven days before the broadcast – from 15 November to 14 December – saw by far the largest number of pieces, 948 or 54 percent of the entire sample. By contrast, the time between 15 October and 14 November saw 457 articles, 26 percent of the total. The four weeks between 15 December and 14 January saw an even smaller number – 351 articles or 20 percent of the total.

Because we chose our entire sample of 586 articles evenly across the three periods, we did not expect it to directly reflect the skew in coverage caused by the program. Nevertheless, in examining the sample as a whole we could already note that the broadcast stood out as a major

incident among a coverage of euthanasia and assisted suicide during the three periods that was otherwise slight and superficial. Headlines, which indicate attention paid to a topic, provide an example.

Among the 586 articles, our analysis found 159 headlines that specifically mentioned individual topics relevant to euthanasia, assisted suicide, or the broadcast incident. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these topics across the headlines. (Because coders could note more than one topic in a headline, the percentage totals more than 100.) *Crime* and *personality* related to euthanasia and assisted suicide stood out among the particular topics, appearing in 45 and 38 percent of the headlines, respectively. Crime invariably referred to Kevorkian’s killing of Thomas Youk. When personality references appeared in a headline, they typically centered on reporters’ characterizations of Jack Kevorkian variously as zealous, fanatical, and, most commonly, ‘Doctor Death’. Ethical issues regarding the propriety of *60 Minutes*’ broadcast of the euthanasia came up in 8 percent of the headlines.



Policy issues regarding euthanasia and assisted suicide took a far back seat to crime and personality in the headlines. Legislative issues appeared in 12 percent of the headlines. Alternatives to euthanasia and assisted suicide, concerns surrounding suicide and the disabled, public opinion polls, and economic issues made up far fewer than 10 percent of the topics.

The relatively frequent mention of crime and personality also showed up in the body of the articles, as Table 1 indicates. Legislative issues related to euthanasia or assisted suicide made a relatively strong appearance; they showed up in 27 percent of the pieces. Other key end-of-life policy topics, however, rarely received mention. These include such key areas as physicians’ ability to control the pain of dying patients so that they will not want to commit suicide (noted in 13% of the articles); the experiences of Oregon and Holland with assisted-suicide laws (12%); concerns surrounding suicide and the disabled (11%); the presence of realistic alternatives to euthanasia and assisted suicide (10%); and a number of other issues (far fewer than 10%). Moreover, when these topics *did* show up in articles, attention to them was fleeting. They appeared in more than one paragraph only 5 percent of the time.

Crime and personality, by contrast, had high profiles in the body of the articles. Fully 43 percent of the 586 pieces mentioned crime, with 27 percent of these mentioning it in more than one paragraph. As for personality, 26 percent of the articles noted it as a topic. Although the number was virtually the same as those that mentioned legislative issues, personality received more attention in the stories: 23 percent of the articles that discussed personality but only 5 percent of the articles that mentioned legislative issues did so in more than one paragraph.

Table 1 Mention of topics related to euthanasia or assisted suicide in body of articles, 15 October 1998-14 January 1999 (N=586)

Topic	(%)
Crime	43
Legislative activities	27
Personality	26
Pain control/good medical care	13
Experience in OR/Holland	12
Disability issues related to death and dying	11
Alternatives to euthanasia or assisted suicide	10
Safeguards	6
Hospice care	6
Withholding treatment	4
Withdrawing treatment	4
Help patient not feel abandoned	4
Spiritual/religious support	3
Additional treatments	3
Competency tests	2
Allowing for patients' change of mind	2
Minimizing financial burden	1

Missing from all but a tiny percentage of articles were the five critiques of euthanasia and assisted suicide that health and bioethical experts consider crucial to evaluating public policies with respect to these topics. Table 2 shows that only two of these critiques showed up in more than 4 percent of the articles, and that even those were rare. Moral prohibitions to euthanasia or assisted suicide appeared in 14 percent of the articles. The slippery slope argument came up in 10 percent of the articles. Virtually unmentioned across the three months was the argument that if euthanasia or assisted suicide were legal, the high medical costs of certain patients would encourage their relatives, hospitals, or insurance companies to terminate care. Health experts have noted that that public debate for and against this proposition is crucial if future corporate, legislative, and judicial decisions are to be influenced by an aware citizenry (see, for example, Byock, 1996; Quill, 1993; Smith, 1997).

Table 2 Mention of critiques of euthanasia or assisted suicide in body of articles, 15 October 1998-14 January 1999 (N=586)

Critiques	(%)
Moral prohibitions	14
Slippery slope	10
Costs and other factor will increase pressure to carry it out	4
Violates medical ethics	3
Undermines trust of docs and caregivers	2

Kevorkian's role in the press discourse

The vast majority – 77 percent – of all the references to Jack Kevorkian during the 12 weeks that we studied occurred during the four weeks around the *60 Minutes* incident. Kevorkian was also highly associated with the mention of crime and personality. Fully 69 percent of the 272 articles that mentioned him discussed crime in relation to euthanasia or assisted suicide. By contrast, of the 314 articles in which he did not appear, only 21 percent mentioned crime in relation to euthanasia or assisted suicide. Similarly, discussion of personality came up in only 14 percent of the 314 pieces without Kevorkian. When Kevorkian was mentioned, however, 41 percent of articles noted personality characteristics – and that always meant *his* personality.

We wondered if Kevorkian's presence was also associated with policy issues. We speculated that articles mentioning him in just a few paragraphs would emphasize the alleged crime and his supposed unusual personality while those mentioning him in several paragraphs would devote space to policy issues, with or without crime and personality. To test this speculation, we divided the appearance of Kevorkian in the body of the article into three categories – no mentions, mentioned in one to five paragraphs, and mentioned in six or more paragraphs.

Table 3 shows that our speculation was partly correct. Compared to articles without Kevorkian, those with him saw a jump in the appearance of half the 22 key policy issues regarding euthanasia and assisted suicide. Of the ten that increased, however, only four – disability issues, Oregon/Holland, pain control, and legislation – rose to a substantial presence. Of these, mention of legislation in various states to outlaw or support end-of-life activities climbed dramatically with the increase in paragraphs mentioning Kevorkian. Table 3 also indicates, however, that crime and personality remained by far the most common topics when Kevorkian was mentioned both in under-five and over-five paragraphs.

We wanted to know if the mild association we detected between the increased appearance of Kevorkian and the appearance of certain policy topics was linked merely to the *mention* of individual issues or to the actual discussion of several issues in some detail. To find out, we created an 'index of discussion' by totaling the number of paragraphs in which the 22 topics were mentioned in each article. A higher index number indicates a fuller discussion of the topics related to euthanasia and assisted suicide. We ran a correlation between the number of mentions of Kevorkian in an article and the index. We found a mild 0.15 relationship using Pearson's *R*. In only a relatively small percentage of articles, then, did Kevorkian's increased presence associate with intensive discussion of policy issues.

Table 3 Association of topics and critiques related to euthanasia or assisted suicide with mention of Kevorkian, 15 October 1998-14 January 1999

Topics	K0 ^a (N=314) (%)	K1 ^b (N=193) (%)	K2 ^c (N=79) (%)
✓ Alternatives to EUTH/AS	9	15	3
✓ Disability	8	14	19
✓ Legislative	24	26	43
✓ Polls	5	9	13
✓ Economic concerns	2	8	14
✓ Oregon/Holland	5	21	17
✓ Safeguards	3	4	19
✓ Competency tests	1	4	5
Allowing change of mind	1	3	4
Withholding treatment	3	5	3
Withdrawing treatment	4	5	4
✓ Pain control	8	20	19
Religious/spiritual support	2	5	1
Minimizing the financial burden	1	1	—
✓ Help patient feeling not abandoned	3	8	1
✓ Hospice care	5	10	1
Additional treatments	2	6	1
✓ Slippery slope	4	11	24
Coercion because of costs	3	5	4
✓ Violates medical ethics	1	5	8
Undermines trust in physicians	1	3	4
Moral/religious prohibitions	14	14	14
✓ Crime	21	58	96
✓ Personality	14	30	67

^a K0 = no mention of Kevorkian in article; ^b K1 = mention of Kevorkian one to five times; ^c K2 = mention of Kevorkian six or more times.

✓ Differences between time periods (absence/presence of variable) significant at the .05 level or better using the chi square statistic

60 Minutes and the press discourse

Not surprisingly, all 210 articles that appeared in our sample during the month around the *60 Minutes* broadcast mentioned Jack Kevorkian at least once.

Because those articles represented 77 percent of all pieces that noted Kevorkian, we might expect that the tendencies noted in the previous section would show up when we compared the four weeks previous to the *60 Minutes* broadcast to the four weeks around the broadcast. That is, we would expect a dramatic increase in crime and personality references. In addition, we would expect a moderate rise in the mention of some policy issues and little or no change in most others.

Table 4 Association of topics and critiques related to euthanasia or assisted suicide with three time periods

Topics	15 Oct-14 Nov (N=176) (%)	15 Nov-14 Dec (N=210) (%)	15 Dec-14 Jan (N=200) (%)
Alternatives to EUTH/AS	9	10	11
Disability	11	13	11
✓Legislative	43	26	15
✓Polls	13	7	4
Economic concerns	5	3	5
✓Oregon/Holland	16	13	8
✓Safeguards	6	10	0.5
Competency tests	43	4	0.5
Allowing change of mind	2	4	0.5
Withholding treatment	2	5	4
Withdrawing treatment	5	6	2
Pain control	14	17	10
Religious/spiritual support	3	3	3
Minimizing financial burden	1	—	1
Help patient feel not abandoned	5	4	5
Hospice care	7	5	7
Additional treatments	2	4	5
✓Slippery slope	8	14	5
Coercion because of costs	5	3	4
Violates medical ethics	2	5	2
Undermines trust in docs	2	3	—
Moral/religious prohibits	10	16	15
✓Crime	26	68	33
✓Personality	17	41	19
✓Media ethics	2	21	7
✓Article focus is euthanasia	30	71	30

✓ Differences between time periods (absence/presence of variable) significant at the .05 level or better using the chi square statistic

It did not work out that way. Crime and personality did rise substantially in the articles between 15 November and 14 December compared to the four earlier weeks. The modest rise in issues that we saw with the mention of Kevorkian did not happen, however. The association we noted earlier between Kevorkian and a few policy issues was scattered unevenly across the three time periods and not concentrated in the month around the broadcast. The result was that the appearance of only one of the topics rose slightly from the first to the second period. The rest either did not change or actually declined from their mention a month earlier.

Table 4 presents findings about the three time spans. It shows that during the broadcast month the number of articles that focused on euthanasia or assisted suicide (rather than just mentioning one or the other term) was substantially higher than the month before or after the

broadcast month. This increased ‘focus’ reflects the large number of stories centering on Kevorkian’s *60 Minutes* tape.

As the table suggests, though, the rise in focus was not accompanied by an increased attention to policy issues. Legislative topics, mentioned in a strong 43 percent of the articles in the month before the broadcast, actually declined by 17 percentage points during the broadcast month. The topics of polls and the experiences of Oregon and Holland, with previously small mentions to begin with, also declined. Thirteen other key topics, rarely mentioned in the first period, remained at their low levels. Only ‘safeguards’ and ‘slippery slope’ saw statistically significant increases, albeit small ones. An additional point, not shown in the table, is that only 6 percent of topics were mentioned in more than one paragraph per article when they did show up. Discussion of policy topics during the month of the Youk broadcast was therefore superficial as well as rarer than they were in the month before the TV program.

Instead of noting issues, the articles during the second period concerned themselves with details of Kevorkian’s alleged crime and bizarre personality. These subjects were not new with the *60 Minutes* spot. Kevorkian’s previous indictments and trials relating to assisted suicides had already primed reporters to brand him as an end-of-life fanatic and alleged criminal. The appearance of crime and personality topics in the month before the broadcast reflects Kevorkian’s prior reputation, to some extent. With the airing of the Youk tape, though, mention of crime in connection with euthanasia or assisted suicide soared from 26 to 68 percent of the articles. Personality rose from 17 to 41 percent. Questions of media ethics – whether it was correct of *60 Minutes* to air the alleged crime – showed up in 21 percent of the pieces.

The small extent of differences between the coverage of these topics in editorial and straight or ‘hard’ news pieces ought to be mentioned here. Across the three periods, opinion matter such as editorials, op-ed columns, and letters to the editor made up 38 percent of the articles mentioning euthanasia or assisted suicide. During the weeks around the *60 Minutes* broadcast, however, these opinion articles shot up to 56 percent of the total. While the other two periods revealed no substantial differences in topics between the hard and opinion stories, the editorials from the period of the broadcast did highlight two topics substantially more than the hard news did. They were pain control, which appeared in 24 percent of the opinion pieces and only 10 percent of the straight ones, and the ethics of *60 Minutes*’ decision to broadcast the Youk tape, which appeared in only 14 percent of the straight news but 51 percent of the opinion pieces. Apart from these exceptions, the opinion and straight news articles closely paralleled each other with respect to the scant appearance of topics related to euthanasia and assisted suicide and the high percentages of crime and personality.

A close reading of all these articles for the overall press response to the *60 Minutes* incident emphasized what the data present so far in this section imply: reporters and editorialists overwhelmingly framed Kevorkian’s euthanasia as a crime-and-personality story. Doctor Death had gone further than ever to pursue his fanaticism, killing someone on national TV. Several editorials took up the appropriateness of *60 Minutes*’ decision to play the tape. Much more of the writing in hard news and editorial matter, though, turned on the mechanics of the criminal process and Kevorkian’s responses. Would a jury convict Kevorkian of murder, as prosecutors insisted? Would he really defend himself without a lawyer, as his former attorneys seemed to suggest? What would the future of this septuagenarian be if he had to go to jail?

The flavor of the crime-and-personality discussion is reflected in the sources whom reporters quoted or cited during the month around the broadcast. As Table 5 shows, Kevorkian’s

comments were cited or quoted most; these tended to be comments that reflected on his personality or chances of going to jail. Apart from Kevorkian himself, prosecutors and defense attorneys were clearly the most popular sources. Reporters hardly ever turned to people who would be able to elicit the medical, legal, and bioethical issues surrounding Thomas Youk's death. The articles hardly ever presented legislators, ethicists, physicians, or representatives of the American Medical Association. Spokespeople from the Hemlock society, religious organizations, or academia were also virtually absent.

Table 5 indicates that the appearance of these end-of-life experts had not been high during the first period studied – the weeks before broadcast. The *60 Minutes* incident could have served as an opportunity for reporters to seek alternative voices to Kevorkian in order to clarify the topic of euthanasia for their readers. That they did not do so then or from 15 December to 14 January – the third period studied – emphasizes how little Kevorkian's videotaped euthanasia contributed to discussion of end-of-life issues in the press.

In fact, as the crime-and-personality frame carried into the third period, it ironically further suppressed the policy topics that had already diminished in appearance during the month around the broadcast. Table 4 shows that most of the other policy issues remained at the same very low level that they had been during the previous eight weeks. Compared to the previous two-month period, however, mention of legislation fell further, from 26 percent to 15 percent of the pieces. Mention of polls, Oregon and Holland also declined, and 'safeguards' diminished to less than 1 percent.

Concluding remarks

Far from encouraging more press discussion of end-of-life policies, then, Kevorkian's actions ironically reduced it in some cases. A broader conclusion from this study is that the 129 newspapers in our sample did not use the televised euthanasia as a way to open up public discussion of controversial end-of-life issues. They also did not turn to experts who could have shed light on implications of the incident for the larger society. The press preferred, instead, to focus on the crime and personality aspects of the situation.

From the standpoint of people interested in social policy regarding the end of life, this finding is unfortunate. In one form or another practices such as assisted suicide and euthanasia confront an increasing number of patients and their families as the US population ages substantially and as technologies for keeping people alive with extreme mental and physical debilitation proliferate. At present, most Americans confront these issues and the laws guiding them not as citizens concerned with social policy but patients and relatives at their most vulnerable moments of pain and suffering. At the same time, spirited policy decisions about these activities are negotiated in legislative and judicial arenas by insurance firms, hospitals, health maintenance organizations, and health professionals. Those policy decisions take place outside the public limelight even though their outcomes profoundly affect what those patients and their families can do, when and how.

Because the Kevorkian incident riveted huge numbers of people to the topics of euthanasia and assisted suicide, it was a great opportunity to make the broad public aware of the key issues and players. That it did not is a missed opportunity and can be lamented as a press failure by bioethicists and health advocates interested in social input. The absence from the articles of important individuals and groups involved in policy debates may also signal a failure on the experts' part to ensure that reporters who covered the Kevorkian issue knew their stance.

At this point we do not know whether they attempted and failed to press their viewpoints or simply did not try.

Table 5 Association of sources quoted or cited in the articles with the three time periods

Quoted or cited sources	15 Oct-14 Nov (N=176) (%)	15 Nov-14 Dec (N=210) (%)	15 Dec-14 Jan (N=200) (%)
Ethicist	3	3	2
AMA	1	5	1
MD	3	3	1
Nurse	—	0.5	—
Other health worker	2	0.5	—
✓Prosecutor	2	23	0.5
✓Defense attorney	6	18	0.5
Judge	1	7	2
Legislator	3	5	4
Police	1	1	1
Mike Wallace	—	6	—
<i>60 Minutes</i> executives	—	—	1
✓Kevorkian	5	33	2
Thomas Youk	—	1	0.5
Youk's family	—	4	0.5
Hemlock spokesperson	2	3	1
Religious spokesperson	10	4	10
Humanities scholar	1	2	2
Science scholar	—	1	1

✓ Differences between time periods (absence/presence of variable) significant at the .05 level or better using the chi square statistic. All other differences between time periods not significant.

Stepping back to the broader topic of the press's coverage of domestic zealotry, this study provides a validation of the essentially conservative and sensationalist impulses of the American press. The 'if it bleeds it leads' motto that sets much of the front-page news agenda certainly predicted the attention to Kevorkian's euthanasia on *60 Minutes*. What this study additionally suggests, however, is that events of zealotry are not covered heavily beyond the bleeding. The claim by Barnhurst and Mutz (1992) that news analysis of 'social problems, interpretations and themes' is triumphing over event-centered reporting certainly does not apply here. Recalling Walter Lippman's (1922) searchlight metaphor, the press's basic impulse when confronting people and groups it dubs fanatics may well be to narrow rather than broaden the beam of social discourse. From a functional standpoint, the result may well be to harden the public against zealous acts. In the long-term, however, ignorance by Americans of key issues and policies shaping their lives may be a more important consequence.

The work of journalists is central to the dynamics discussed in this paper, and it would seem useful to explore it in some detail. Although the literature on newswork readily provides reasons for some of the content patterns we have noted, journalists may approach domestic zealotry as a news form unto itself, with scripts and tropes that distinguish it much as 'media

events' have developed a particular rhetoric (see Dayan and Katz, 1992). What distinguishes domestic zealotry from other sorts of domestic news is that its perpetrators merge the sensational and the explicitly ideological – two characteristics that do not normally collide in everyday reportage. As such, the phenomenon provides an interesting setting for asking questions about the link between ideology, the construction of legitimacy, and journalist–source relationships.

Our preliminary discussions with journalists and Kevorkian's associates, for example, suggest that the construction of Kevorkian's image was very much a two-way street in which the physician learned to manipulate the press and pursue his agenda quite skillfully. These discussions lead us to believe that Kevorkian got the kind of attention he wanted in the crime-and-personality coverage. Seeing himself a martyr to his cause, Kevorkian's main goal was not to keep out of jail. Rather, it was to play down the idea that there are many alternatives to euthanasia. His intention was to portray himself as helping Thomas Youk choose between two stark choices – years of unbearable suffering or easy, painless death. From that standpoint, the patterns of content that we found during the weeks of the broadcast may well have been the result of a complex series of longstanding interactions between Kevorkian, reporters, and editors.

Of course, research needs to be conducted to note whether the patterns we found in this study generalize to other domestic acts that press outlets construct as fanatical; the sabotage of websites and the activities of conservative militias are particularly current topics that come to mind. It might also be underscored that this study tracked press discussions only through seven weeks after the event. Further study might find that zealous incidents lead to a kind of 'sleeper effect' – that is, a delayed reaction to the content – on the pages of newspapers: reporters do not raise sociopolitical issues that relate to such incidents for quite a while – perhaps months – until certain sources or smaller events lead them to write about them. Though perhaps unlikely, it is a tantalizing possibility that ought to be pursued.

A somewhat related question that this study raises has to do with the response of organizations that are affected directly by the issues that the zealot raises. To what extent do they take the mere presence of a zealot in press coverage as a signal that they should act differently than in the past? So, for example, did the American Medical Association take wide reportage on Kevorkian's televised euthanasia as an indication that it should step up its political activities to outlaw assisted suicide and to make the public aware that most physicians abhor the practice? If yes, such institutional responses may lead to the 'sleeper effect' suggested earlier.

Clearly, there is still quite a bit more to study. The construction and implications of political zealotry raise fascinating and important questions for the press and society.

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Note

1. The discards were due to discovery during data input that these articles were from foreign newspapers or were copies of other articles in the sample.

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