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Taken to Extremes: Newspapers and Kevorkian's Televised Euthanasia Incident

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Abstract

Book Description:

Medicine and the media exist in a unique symbiosis. Increasingly, health-care consumers turn to media sources—from news reports to Web sites to tv shows—for information about diseases, treatments, pharmacology, and important health issues. And just as the media scour the medical terrain for news stories and plot lines, those in the health-care industry use the media to publicize legitimate stories and advance particular agendas. The essays in *Cultural Sutures* delineate this deeply collaborative process by scrutinizing a broad range of interconnections between medicine and the media in print journalism, advertisements, fiction films, television shows, documentaries, and computer technology.

In this volume, scholars of cinema studies, philosophy, English, sociology, health-care education, women's studies, bioethics, and other fields demonstrate how the world of medicine engages and permeates the media that surround us. Whether examining the press coverage of the Jack Kevorkian–euthanasia controversy; pondering questions about accessibility, accountability, and professionalism raised by such films as *Awakenings*, *The Doctor*, and *Lorenzo's Oil*; analyzing the depiction of doctors, patients, and medicine on *E.R.* and *Chicago Hope*; or considering the ways in which digital technologies have redefined the medical body, these essays are consistently illuminating and provocative.

Disciplines

Bioethics and Medical Ethics | Broadcast and Video Studies | Communication | Criminology | Critical and Cultural Studies | Health Communication | Journalism Studies | Mass Communication | Medicine and Health | Other Medicine and Health Sciences | Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance | Social Influence and Political Communication

Taken to Extremes

Newspapers and Kevorkian's Televised Euthanasia Incident

Arthur L. Caplan and Joseph Turow

Jack Kevorkian, who is currently serving a prison sentence in Michigan, played a crucial role in putting the issue of physician-assisted suicide center stage in the arena of American politics. Beginning in 1990, his actions to help various persons to die set off storms of controversy in the popular media and in academic medical and bioethical circles (W. Smith 1997; Snyder and Caplan 2000). Yet despite his influence, Kevorkian was often described, even by admirers, as a zealot.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines a zealot as “a fanatically committed person, . . . a person possessed by excessive zeal for and uncritical attachment to a cause or position.” It goes on to characterize zealotry as an incident that reflects a person’s “excessive and uncritical commitment” to an idea or ideal.

Clearly, whether a person or act is zealous is in the eye of the beholder. Press historians and sociologists have confronted the social meaning of extreme zeal through explorations of the ways in which the mainstream press has constructed individuals and groups as zealots, marginalizing them and their actions in the process. With the exception of the abortion controversy, when researchers have focused on contemporary coverage of zealots and zealotry by American media, their work has centered on “terrorist” activities (e.g., Weimann and Winn 1994; Schnuck 1992). Their analyses have spoken to the media’s reflection of U.S. 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).

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 that individuals and groups carry out at least partly to rivet public attention to their political cause, from the so-called Unabomber’s booby-trapped packages to the exploits of the Ku Klux Klan to cyber-sabotage. More generally, the question addresses an enduring issue about press coverage itself. Does the journalistic reliance on storytelling narrow or expand public discourse about contentious domestic sociopolitical issues?

To understand the way in which the press treated the “zealotry” of Jack Kevorkian, we examined print media coverage of a videotaped euthanasia that was broadcast by the popular CBS news magazine program *60 Minutes*. Kevorkian planned the death with an eye toward having it broadcast on national television, carried out the killing on a patient with ALS disease, taped the killing with the patient’s permission, and subsequently offered it to the CBS show. The tape was aired as part of a segment hosted by Mike Wallace on 22 November 1998.

Kevorkian said he did this to force the public and politicians to accept the legitimacy of euthanasia and assisted suicide. Did he succeed? How did press discussions of euthanasia and assisted suicide change as a result of the broadcast? Using those terms as keywords, we conducted a content analysis on a large random sample of U.S. newspapers during the months before, during, and after the broadcast.

The results were startling. The broadcast killing sparked 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 euthanasia, end-of-life care, and the pros and cons of physician-assisted suicide. Instead, the articles overwhelmingly framed Kevorkian's activities as a crime-and-personality story. The comments of prosecutors and defense attorneys dominated the media coverage accorded the incident. Their statements far, far outnumbered other sources such as physicians, nurses, ethicists, patients, and advocacy group representatives who could shed light on the substantive ethical, social, and clinical issues surrounding end-of-life care and assisted suicide. The crime-and-personality coverage of Kevorkian's act muted the slight coverage in the media of philosophical, social, and political issues surrounding euthanasia and assisted suicide already present in media accounts in the weeks and months before the broadcast of Kevorkian's killing. Diminished attention to these topics remained weeks after the videotape aired on national television. Kevorkian's act brought discussion of the ethics of assisted suicide and euthanasia to a grinding halt as the media concentrated on whether he was crazy, whether he ought be punished, and, if so, how.

Past Coverage of Social Activism

Many writers have noted that the ideology of mainstream news in the United States is inherently conservative: it depicts historically normative institutional practices as preferable to challenges to those practices. It should come as no surprise, then, that throughout the nation's history, mainstream press outlets tend to dub as "fanatics" 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 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" (87) who exploited taxpayer-funded services such as the post office for demonic, propagandistic ends. Writing about the growing labor movement of the early twentieth 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" (173). 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 *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 worldviews appear to pose a threat to middle-of-the-road values and politics (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 beyond that? That is, do they use events that the fanatics stage to explore the social issues that underlie them and present a range of (presumably more socially acceptable) solutions?

Broader scholarly literature on journalism does not offer 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” (27). 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 throughout the twentieth century. The categories in that research, though, did not allow the authors to explore the extent, nature, or depth of the social interpretation.

The extent, nature, and depth of social interpretation that follows in the wake of a zealous or fanatical act is a crucial component of journalism’s 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 their behavior. Moreover, from 1960s bra burners to the Unabomber to those manipulating huge street puppets to protest the World Trade Organization or genetically modified foods, many people who perform socially provocative acts have said that they carry them out at least in part to garner press coverage of the underlying conditions and issues that merit public attention.

How mainstream press outlets cover this convergence of the explicitly sensational and the explicitly ideological have 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, is the press’s basic impulse to broaden or narrow the sociopolitical beam?

The Case of Kevorkian

The controversy surrounding Jack Kevorkian presents a good opportunity to investigate this topic. He first entered into the debate about physician-assisted suicide in the late 1980s when he wrote a series of articles which argued 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 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 (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 fifty deaths and stated that he had assisted persons in dying in at least another fifty instances. His license as a physician was removed as a result of his involvement with assisted suicide.

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 suicide assistance 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 Kevorkian administers a lethal preparation to ALS sufferer Thomas 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 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.

Subsequent to the broadcast, *60 Minutes* was subjected to heated criticism from viewers about the decision to put Kevorkian’s tape on the air. No significant response was aired concerning these criticisms. But after a symposium on the whole affair at the University of Michigan on 22 February 1999, at which Mike Wallace was a participant, *60 Minutes* decided to revisit the topic of assisted suicide and did so in a broadcast that aired in May 1999.

Kevorkian’s public activities had important consequences. As a result of a voter referendum, the state of Oregon enacted legislation that was passed in November 1998. Proponents of the legalization said many times that the most difficult problem they faced was separating their proposal from the activities of Jack Kevorkian (Caplan, Snyder, and Faber-Langendoen 2000). Kevorkian was seen by these Oregonians as a zealot whose actions were so out of the mainstream that they put the entire political movement in Oregon at risk to achieve the end that Kevorkian claimed he sought.

The Study

We investigated whether and how Jack Kevorkian’s 22 November 1998 appearance on *60 Minutes* affected mainstream U.S. newspapers’ discussion of euthanasia and assisted suicide. 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 to 14 November, 15 November to 14 December, and 15 December to 14 January.

Using the Lexis-Nexis full-text database of large- and medium-circulation U.S. newspapers, we retrieved all articles that mentioned *euthanasia* or *assisted suicide* in the headline or body during that period; the number totaled 1,756 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 1,756 pieces would not yield enough articles from the four weeks before and after that time. Consequently, we decided to choose randomly the same number of articles—200—from each of the four weeks. In total, our sample comprised 586 randomly selected articles.

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 (e.g., Caplan 1995, 1998; Uhlman 1998; Snyder and Caplan 2000). 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 the segment); crime/murder; humane alternatives to euthanasia and assisted suicide; legislative activities; public opinion or polling; critiques of euthanasia and assisted suicide; the 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 whether the assisted-suicide laws of the Netherlands or the state of Oregon were discussed. They also noted whether the paragraph mentioned safeguards or competency tests of those seeking death. The keywords *humane alternatives* included a range of activities, from withholding treatment to pain control to spiritual or religious support to hospice care. Mention of critiques of euthanasia or assisted suicide related to five major points that are emphasized in the bioethical literature (Caplan 1995, 1998; Nuland 1994; Uhlman 1998). They included moral and religious prohibitions to euthanasia or assisted suicide, concern that allowing euthanasia by physicians undermines public trust in them, concern that it violates long-standing precepts of medical ethics, concern that it encourages killing people who cannot afford to pay costs associated with long illnesses, and the “slippery slope” argument that opening the door to physician-assisted killing of the dying will lead to killing of the disabled and other vulnerable persons (Caplan 1998).

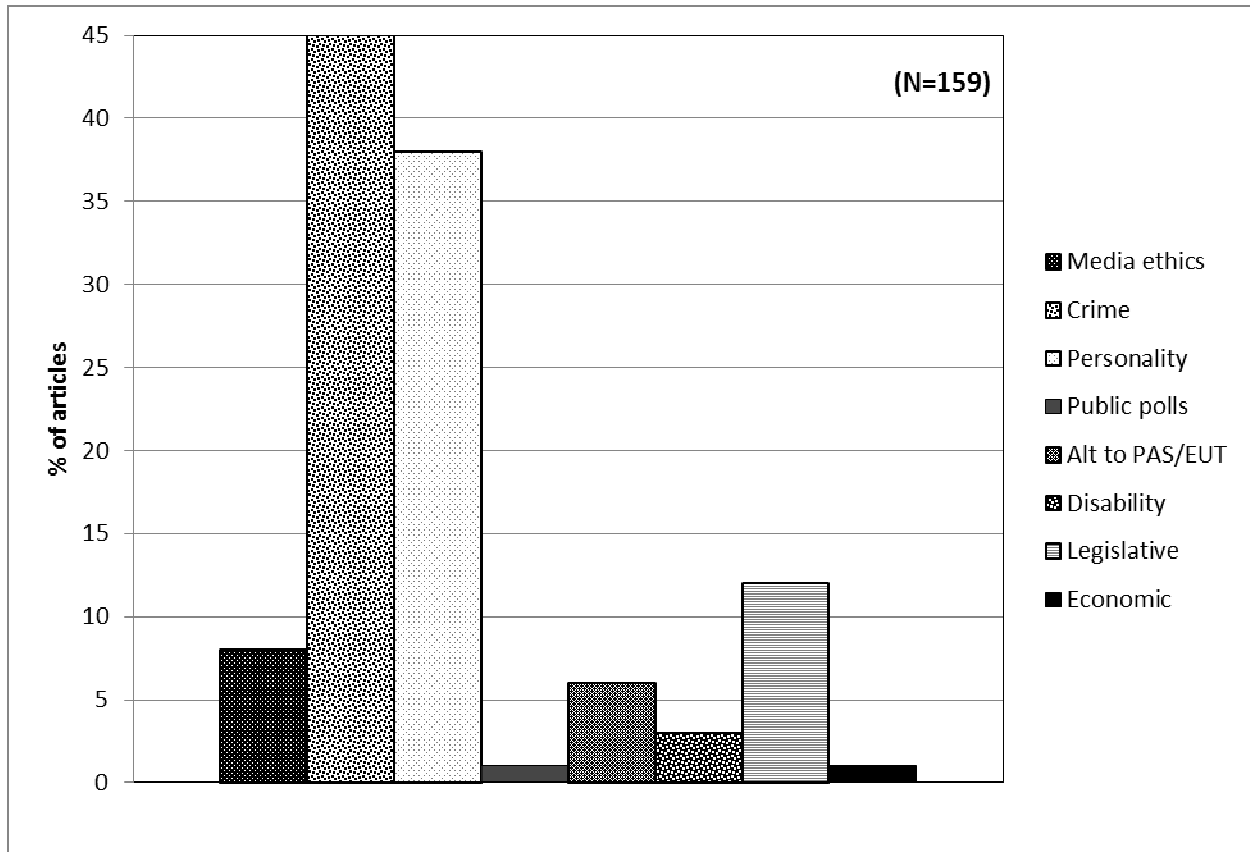
In the final section of the instrument, coders noted paragraph by paragraph what kinds of people reporters quoted or cited in their discussions about euthanasia and assisted suicide. Were they ethicists, AMA spokespeople, M.D.’s, nurses, end-of-life patients, their relatives, police, judges, prosecutors, legislators, *60 Minutes* producers, Kevorkian himself, Thomas Youk (the man Kevorkian killed), 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 of Pennsylvania’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 and had decision rules clarified for reliable coding. By the end of the training period, the intercoder reliability average was 0.89.

Findings

Press Coverage as a Whole

As noted earlier, an exploration of the Lexis-Nexis database found 1,756 articles in 129 U.S. 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, 947, or 54 percent of the entire sample. By contrast, the time between 15 October and 14 November saw 468 articles, 26 percent of the total. The four weeks between 15 December and 14 January saw an even smaller number—343 articles, or 20 percent of the total.



I. Headline topics related to euthanasia and assisted suicide ($N = 159$).

Because we chose our entire sample of 586 articles evenly across the three periods, we did not expect it to reflect directly 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 an otherwise slight and superficial coverage of euthanasia and assisted suicide during the three periods. 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 to more than 100.) *Crime* and *personality* related to euthanasia and assisted suicide stood out among the particular topics, appearing in 45 percent 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 Kevorkian variously as zealous, fanatical, and, most commonly, "Doctor Death." Ethical issues were raised, but they were nearly all related to the propriety of *60 Minutes*' broadcast of Kevorkian killing Youk. They appeared in 8 percent of the headlines.

Coverage of policy and ethical issues paled in comparison 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 constituted 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 key areas such as physicians' ability to control the pain of dying patients so they will not want to commit suicide (noted in 13

Table 1. Mention of Topics Related to Euthanasia or Assisted Suicide in Body of Articles, 15 October 1998–14 January 1999 (percentage)

	(<i>N</i> = 586)
Crime	42
Legislative activities	27
Personality	26
Pain control/good medical care	13
Experience in Oregon/the Netherlands	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
Helping 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

percent of the articles); the experiences of Oregon and the Netherlands with assisted suicide laws (12 percent); concerns surrounding suicide and the disabled (11 percent); the presence of realistic alternatives to euthanasia and assisted suicide (10 percent); and a number of other issues (far fewer than 10 percent). When these topics were raised, they received little attention. 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—meaning questions about the mental status and zealotry of Kevorkian—26 percent of the articles addressed themselves to this theme. Although the number was virtually the same as those that mentioned legislative issues, personality received more attention in the stories. Twenty-three 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.

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 was legal, the high medical costs of certain patients would encourage their relatives, hospitals, or insurance companies to terminate care. Health experts have noted 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 (W. Smith 1997; Byock 1996; Quill 1993; Caplan, Snyder, and Faber-Langendoen 2000).

Table 2. Mention of Critiques of Euthanasia or Assisted Suicide in Body of Articles, 15 October 1998–14 January 1999 (percentage)

	(N = 586)
Moral prohibitions	14
Slippery slope	10
Costs and other factors will increase pressure to carry it out	4
Violates medical ethics	3
Undermines trust of doctors and caregivers	2

Kevorkian's Role in the Press Discourse

The vast majority—77 percent—of all the references to Jack Kevorkian during the twelve 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. In the 314 articles in which he did not appear, only 21 percent mentioned crime in relation to euthanasia or assisted suicide. Personality came up in only 14 percent of the 314 pieces without Kevorkian. When Kevorkian was mentioned, however, 41 percent of the articles referred to issues about *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 that did not feature Kevorkian, those that did saw a jump in the appearance of half the twenty-two key policy issues regarding euthanasia and assisted suicide. Of the ten that increased, however, only four—disability issues, Oregon/the Netherlands, 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 in both fewer than five and more than 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

Table 3. Association of Topics and Critiques Related to Euthanasia or Assisted Suicide with Mention of Kevorkian, 15 October 1998–14 January 1999 (percentage)

	K ₀ * (N=314)	K ₁ * (N=193)	K ₂ * (N=79)
Alternatives to euthanasia/assisted suicide ^a	9	15	3
Disability ^a	8	14	19
Legislative ^a	24	26	43
Polls ^a	5	9	13
Economic concerns ^a	2	8	14
Oregon/the Netherlands ^a	5	21	17
Safeguards ^a	3	4	19
Competency tests ^a	1	4	5
Allowing change of mind	1	3	4
Withholding treatment	3	5	3
Withdrawing treatment	4	5	4
Pain control ^a	8	20	19
Religious/spiritual support	2	5	1
Minimizing the financial burden	1	1	—
Helping patient not feel abandoned ^a	3	8	1
Hospice care ^a	5	10	1
Additional treatments	2	6	1
Slippery slope ^a	4	11	24
Coercion because of costs	3	5	4
Violates medical ethics ^a	1	5	8
Undermines trust in physicians	1	3	4
Moral/religious prohibitions	14	14	14
Crime ^a	21	58	96
Personality ^a	14	30	67

*K₀ = no mention of Kevorkian in article; K₁ = mention of Kevorkian 1–5 times; K₂ = mention of Kevorkian 6 or more times.

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

created an “index of discussion” by adding the number of paragraphs in which the twenty-two topics were mentioned in each article. The higher the index number, the fuller the discussion of 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 .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.

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. We expected a dramatic increase in crime and personality and a moderate rise in the mention of ethical and social issues. We were wrong.

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 ethical and 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” reflected the large number of stories centering on Kevorkian’s *60 Minutes* tape.

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 percent during the broadcast month. The topics of polls and the experiences of Oregon and the Netherlands, 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. Discussions of policy topics during the month that the Youk killing was broadcast were 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, a crazed zealot, and a 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 percent to 68 percent of the articles. Personality rose from 17 percent to 41 percent. Questions of media ethics—whether *60 Minutes* was correct to air the alleged crime—showed up in 21 percent of the pieces.

Table 4. Association of Topics and Critiques Related to Euthanasia or Assisted Suicide with Three Time Periods (percentage)

	15 Oct.–14 Nov. (N = 176)	15 Nov.–14 Dec. (N = 210)	15 Dec.–14 Jan. (N = 200)
Alternatives to euthanasia/ assisted suicide ^a	9	10	11
Disability	11	13	11
Legislative ^a	43	26	15
Polls ^a	13	7	4
Economic concerns	5	3	5
Oregon/ the Netherlands ^a	16	13	8
Safeguards ^a	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 supports	3	3	3
Minimizing financial burden	1	—	1
Helping patient not feel abandoned	5	4	5
Hospice care	7	5	7
Additional treatments	2	4	5
Slippery slope ^a	8	14	5
Coercion because of costs	5	3	4
Violates medical ethics	2	5	2
Undermines trust in doctors	2	3	—
Moral/religious prohibitions	10	16	15
Crime ^a	26	68	33
Personality ^a	17	41	19
Media ethics ^a	2	21	7
Article focus is on euthanasia ^a	30	71	30

^aDifferences between time periods (presence/absence of the topics) are significant at the .05 level or better using the chi square statistic.

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. Although 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 in 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 presented 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 was sentenced to prison?

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 elucidate the medical, legal, and bioethical issues surrounding Thomas Youk's death. The articles hardly ever presented legislators, ethicists, physicians, or representatives of any professional organization of doctors, nurses, or social workers. Spokespeople from the Hemlock society, religious organizations, and 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 December 15 to January 14—the third period studied—emphasizes how little Kevorkian's videotaped euthanasia contributed to discussion of end-of-life issues in the press.

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 where 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 and Oregon and the Netherlands also declined, and "safeguards" diminished to less than 1 percent.

What Did Kevorkian Do with the Press, and What Did the Press Do with Kevorkian?

Far from encouraging more discussion of substantive issues surrounding end-of-life decisions, Kevorkian's actions ironically reduced it. None of the 129 newspapers in our sample used the televised euthanasia as a way to open up public discussion of controversial end-of-life issues. They 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—Kevorkian himself was the story.

Table 5. Association of Sources Quoted or Cited in the Articles with the Three Time Periods (percentage)

	15 Oct. — 14 Nov. (<i>N</i> = 176)	15 Nov. — 14 Dec. (<i>N</i> = 210)	15 Dec. — 14 Jan. (<i>N</i> = 200)
Ethicist	3	3	2
AMA	1	5	1
M.D.	3	3	1
Nurse	—	0.5	—
Other health worker	2	0.5	—
Prosecutor ^a	2	23	0.5
Defense attorney ^a	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

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

From the standpoint of people interested in social policy regarding the end of life, this finding is deeply disturbing. Decisions about when and how to die are very frequent in an aging and technologically dependent society such as the United States. Requests for assistance in dying are not uncommon, and many health care providers choose to act on those requests (Quill 1993; Snyder and Caplan 2000). Americans confront these issues and the laws governing them not as citizens concerned with social policy but as 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, lobbying organizations, health maintenance organizations, and health professionals. Those policy decisions take place outside the public limelight even though their outcomes profoundly affect what patients and their families do and can do, when and how.

The Kevorkian incident riveted the attention of the nation on euthanasia and assisted suicide. Whatever else it was, it was a great opportunity to make the broad public aware of the key issues. It did not. The press failed to capture the opportunity that Kevorkian presented. Character won out over substance.

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*. At least in the case of Kevorkian, zealotry was not covered heavily beyond the "bleeding." The claim by Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) that news analysis of "social problems, interpretations and themes" is triumphing over event-centered reporting certainly does not apply here. Recalling Walter Lippmann's 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. This may well harden the public against zealous acts. In the long term, however, the failure to move beyond the issue of how to respond to zealotry and what makes individuals become zealots does little to shed light on the deeper issues that underlie zealotry.

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 (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 the relationships between journalists and their sources.

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. Kevorkian learned how to manipulate the press and pursue his agenda quite skillfully. His courtroom appearances, complete with him wearing stocks to show that he was being persecuted by a Puritanical society, were carefully calculated to capture media attention—and they did.

It may be that Jack Kevorkian got exactly the kind of attention he wanted in the media. Seeing himself as 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 an easy, painless death. From that standpoint, the patterns 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.

Zealotry is increasingly in evidence in American political discourse. In some ways, the press justifies its attention to rash acts and crazy behavior, be it on daytime talk shows or on the evening news, by arguing that in the end the rapt attention to the actions of those pushing the edge helps all of us better understand the core issues and challenges that present themselves to us as citizens and voters. That may be, but there is nothing in the press response to Jack Kevorkian's decision to televise an incident of euthanasia that would support this view.

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