Bioethics and the Rituals of Media

by Peter Simonson

Popular media may make short shrift of complex ideas and moral deliberations, but it can also serve bioethics well. Bioethics should embrace the ritual function of the media in bringing issues to public attention and in reinforcing bioethics as a field.

There is dissatisfaction with the media within the field of bioethics. While talking to the news media is part of the job for many scholarly bioethicists, there is much grumbling about it. Moreover, although the popular media has given bioethical issues considerable publicity over the past two decades, scholars in bioethics have often been uneasy with the coverage and worried about its inadequacies. Perhaps these misgivings are inevitable. As a scholarly field, after all, bioethics is committed to serious deliberation about complex issues, and the popular media seem to simplify the complex, reduce deliberation and nuanced argument to sound bite, favor the sensational over the carefully argued, and feature the alluring image instead of the closely considered issue.

But this dissatisfaction is fueled by a partial and incomplete picture of mass media and other communication practices. In fact, far from being antagonistic, the popular media helps to constitute bioethics. Recognizing this, however, requires paying attention to an important distinction in media studies; namely, that communication is not simply a process of transmitting ideas and

information, but is also a mode of ritually enacting the shared understandings of a group. This latter, ritual view, gives a new perspective on two well-known phenomena. First, it reveals that grumbling about media is a form of symbolic distancing that helps define scholarly bioethics as a field. But second, it also undermines that distancing by showing that media presentations of bioethics have in fact bestowed broader public legitimacy upon bioethical issues, institutions, and practitioners.

Communication as Transmission and Ritual

Media theorist James Carey introduced a highly productive schema into communication studies when he distinguished two ways of understanding communication: as transmission and as ritual. Understood as transmission, communication is a means of sending information over space; understood as ritual, it is a mode of maintaining a culture or community over time. The transmission view is dominant in American life, and for most of us it informs commonsense understandings of communication practices. Unsurprisingly, it has also dominated discourse about media and communication within bioethics. Like any conceptual lens, the transmission view magnifies certain features of the world but relieves others to an ill-defined and blurry background.

The transmission view brings out communication's information-conveying qualities. From this perspective, communication is a means for transmitting content from point A to point B—from doctor to patient, author to readers, government to citizens. The transmission view disposes us to think of media (speech, print, the Internet, for example) as mere conduits that carry knowledge, ideas, feelings, stories, impressions, requests, directives, data sets, arguments, and other sorts of communicative messages. It moves us to hold clarity and openness as cherished values of communication. We want understandable diagnoses from our physicians and clear signals from our loved ones—honest communication undistorted by jargon, paternalism, fear, or ill will. The transmission view has a long intellectual history. John Locke gave it significant philosophical expression, but it is also tied to broader traditions of religion and science. From Christian evangelistic traditions of disseminating God's word, to scientific conventions for conveying empirical findings, to the modern conception of individuals as separated beings who convey mental content back and forth, the transmission view has multiple tributaries.

From the ritual perspective, in contrast, communication is a process of re-enacting shared cultural understandings and social relationships. When we shoot the breeze with a friend, we are not just sending information back and forth, but are also enacting and reinforcing our friendship and its characteristic modes of interaction. Our words and bodily gestures display some particular mix of reciprocity and domination, casualness and formality, coordination and conflict. We speak about a favorite topic, and reconfirm shared attention to the practice and its central place in our friendship.

What is true of face-to-face talk is also true of mass-mediated communication, and the ritual view can be applied there as well. In the news, for instance, as Carey writes, "What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contesting forces of the world." Crime stories, for example, remind us of the contemporary world's dangers, reinforce social standards by calling attention to deviations from them, and legitimize the role of law and its official institutions. Journalists draw upon shared cultural categories, "receptacles into which can be poured the disconnected data of everyday life," and reaffirm their currency for the reading and viewing public. From stock dramas (science versus religion, technology run amok), to named practices ("professional wrongdoing," "breach of human rights"), to common roles (the reformer, the researcher, the innocent victim), journalists draw upon and amplify existing conventions, and in so doing re-establish cultural and social norms.

The ritual view is also fed by distinct intellectual streams, but these tend to be less culturally pronounced in the Anglo-American world. If communication as transmission finds expression in Christian evangelism and in Protestantism, communication as ritual finds resonance in traditions of liturgy and formalized worship. Instead of Locke and Anglo-American liberal individualism, the ritual view has philosophical roots in the broad swath cut by Hegel and his varied progeny, especially Marx and the American philosophers George Herbert Mead and John Dewey. This is a tradition which resists social atomism and treats the collective aspects of life as real and fundamental. Instead of "ritual," Marxian students of communication talk about ideology, but the principle is similar: media and other communication practices re-establish cultural and social norms, but these norms are now enmeshed in relations of power that favor some groups and some ideas but systematically disempower others.

Transmission and ritual are different perspectives from which to view
any mode of communication, from a journal article to an ethics committee meeting, a white lab coat on a philosopher, a photograph on a desk, an e-mail message, or a Hollywood blockbuster. Up to now, the transmission view has dominated discussion of communication in bioethics circles. The *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* assumes the transmission view when it calls news media “organizations that voluntarily take on the responsibility of providing needed information to the community” and asserts that “both journalists and bioethicists take their job to be informing public debate about important issues.” But when the *NBC Nightly News* runs a story on human cloning, its reporters are not using images and discourse just to impart facts and information. They are also reaffirming conventions of journalistic authority and legitimating the expertise of those they interview. From all that is happening in the world, they are picking out this event as worthy of shared, public attention. And they are describing this event within a particular narrative frame, say the conflict of values or the triumphs of technology.

Like other acts of communication, news broadcasts do not simply link sender and receiver in networks of information exchange, but also enact and reaffirm the values, understandings, ideologies, and common practices of social groups.

**Art for Art’s Sake? Scholarly Bioethics and Profane Media**

If bioethics characteristically evaluates communication practices from the transmission view, there is also a broader pattern of discourse about popular media within the field. That pattern is marked by comments that symbolically distance scholars in bioethics from an entity sometimes simply called “the media.” Like the transmission view, discourse about “the media” is commonplace in American society, and has been since at least the early 1970s. We say that politics is created for media, that violence is caused by media, and that new media technologies are changing the way we live, think, and interact. This discourse helps to remind Americans what they find significant (media and new technologies, we think, make our world unique), and, to a surprising degree, unites them in who they think is to blame (both left and right can agree that “the media” is at fault for various social ills). Similarly, discourse about popular media is one of the ways scholarly bioethics ritually reminds itself of who it is. Scholars separate the intellectual world of scholarly bioethics from the profane realm of popular media, and they lightly scapegoat those who cross the border that separates the two.

Yet as culturally oriented scholars in the field have argued, bioethics is an endeavor partly constituted through discursive practices, through characteristic ways of talking and writing. Todd Chambers has recently drawn upon anthropologist Victor Crapanzano’s theory of rhetorical “centering,” a mode of creating meaningful order through narrative or metaphor, to argue that bioethicists’ accounts of their transition from the armchair to the bedside have helped center the disparate, interdisciplinary field of bioethics (even as the field is marked by centering disagreements among competing methods of bioethical inquiry). Discourse about media displays another important set of centering moves.

Scholars in the field often use the notion of complexity to distance bioethics from media. When George Annas analyzes prime time bioethics, for instance, he writes, “*ER* is pretty, but the complexities of modern medicine are lost on both its writers and its audience.” Because it deals with complex issues, bioethics requires “serious and sustained discourse,” but in popular media, that discourse is “chopped into fragments.” Albert Jonsen laments. Bette Grigger writes that “hard-news stories, with their focus on getting information out as succinctly as possible, impose strict limitations on what can be offered in the way of ethical commentary and leave little opportunity to plumb the moral depths of stories”; in broadcast journalism, meanwhile “the format of the half-hour news show is not conducive to sustained ethical reflection but rather reduces discussion to a series of ‘ethical sound bites.’”

James Rachels makes a similar observation when he writes that reporters “aren’t interested in detailed analysis of lengthy qualifications” but instead want “a short, pithy quote.” In all of these cases, the popular media is contrasted, implicitly or explicitly, with scholarly bioethics, which is portrayed as an intellectual endeavor marked by sustained reflection, careful qualifications, and an appreciation for the complexity of the issues involved.

Related to this symbolic distancing, it is worth noting the light scapegoating directed by bioethicists toward Art Caplan. Since the early 1980s, Caplan has of course energetically taken bioethics to the media. “The ubiquitous bioethicist from the University of Pennsylvania,” as he was described in one recent bioethics forum, and “America’s best-known bioethicist,” according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Caplan frequently appears in news stories and media discussion shows that address bioethical matters. He also has strong ties to Hollywood entertainment media, dating back to his consultation for *Junassic Park*. Currently, Caplan’s center at Pennsylvania is facilitating a project with *ER* in which graduate and secondary school students offer bioethical analyses of the weekly television drama. “We’ve got to educate the next generation through their media,” Caplan has said. “Through television, movies, and the Internet.”

Though criticism from bioethicists has eased since Caplan began his media strategy fifteen years ago, bioethicists still plainly think he has crossed over the group’s social borders and into profane territory. When Caplan’s name comes up in conversation, he is variously criticized.
laughed about, defended, and praised, but everyone seems to have an opinion about him. Although defenders are more frequent than they once were, critics continue to argue that the sound bites, superficiality, and sensationalism of popular media are not conducive to bioethical discussion. Critics also argue that Caplan is too visible and too driven by ego. Such criticisms open up a symbolic distance between center and periphery, between the scholarly core of bioethics and the profane world of publicity and popular media. These are discursive rituals by means of which the group identifies its borders: the integrity of bioethics is at stake in contacts with popular media.10

Recognizing the ritual dimensions of a type of discourse is not at odds with thinking that the discourse reports true and accurate information about the world. In all sorts of important ways, scholarly bioethics is indeed very different from mainstream news and entertainment. The Hastings Center Report is unlikely to be turned into a successful sitcom pilot. Similarly, complexity is more than a ritualized symbol for centering the discipline of bioethics: it is also a descriptive term that validly characterizes dimensions of bioethical inquiry and the moral problems it charts. Yet like all communicated language, discourse about popular media does more than neutrally report on the world; it also recreates, re-enacts, and sometimes changes that world. Symbolic distances point to and maintain real distances, like that between scholarly communities and popular forums of communication. In the case of bioethics, I want to make a case for narrowing that distance and argue that the field is, and should be, entwined with mass media.

Rituals of Popular Bioethics and Status Conferral

If the transmission view of communication helps scholarly bioethics distance itself from the popular media, the ritual view can illuminate ways in which bioethics and media are intimately and appropriately connected.

Like performance in other rituals, appearing in the mass media involves changes and confirmations of status. At graduation ceremonies, students setting theory of the press, namely, that news doesn’t so much tell us what to think but instead what to think about. The roots of this theory go back to the 1920s and the writings by the public philosopher and journalist Walter Lippmann. In Public Opinion, a classic work of twentieth century democratic political theory, Lippmann observed that newspapers do not inform readers about the world’s events, for these are too complex to be understood by ordinary people constrained by limited knowledge and everyday distractions. Instead, news stories “signalize” events: they give us a general sense of what is happening and who is dealing with it. Agenda-setting theory essentially combines the ideas of status conferral and signaling, then couples them with another staple of mass communication theory, the “two-step flow,” which holds that issues treated in the media are then passed from a particularly engaged segment of the audience to society at large via face-to-face conversations.12

When we draw together these different theoretical pieces, we can see that bioethics can benefit from even the most sensationalized, sound-bitten, and superficial portrayal in mass media. First, every time such a story appears, the public significance of bioethical issues is reconfirmed in a way that may be impossible except through similar mass media channels. By appearing in these public forums, the status of the issues is confirmed, and their general significance is signaled for the public at large. Second, for any given issue in news media, there is likely to be a core group of readers or viewers who are quite interested, for either personal or intellectual reasons, and these readers then discuss items on the new-established public agenda with their friends and intimates.

Finally, bioethicists and their academic institutions have benefited from the status conferral of popular media. When the Philadelphia Inquirer published its profile of Art Caplan, for example, the story stressed the ABC
News and 20/20 crews waiting to see him, and it described him as "an expert on Today, a quotable notable on NPR," and a "bona fide People-magazine-profiled celebrity." The *Inquirer* used his appearance in these media outlets to signal that Caplan was worthy of the attention of the general public. Caplan himself reported that some of his students learned of him and his center through the media. Other bioethicists report more everyday, but analogous, processes of status conferral: friends who congratulated the person on appearing in the *New York Times* (though the friends couldn't remember exactly what the article said); co-workers who hurried off to watch the bioethicist's television sound bite (though those people saw and spoke with him every day). Through the media, bioethical institutions and people gain new modes of social elevation and public visibility.

**Bioethical Quandaries and Liberal Rites of Public Affliction**

We are taught in higher education to be close readers, but a wide-angle lens sometimes gives a better view. Consider television shows and magazine or newspaper articles. Often times, scholars who look at these mass media texts give them a "close read," paying careful attention to particular words, phrases, and sequences of images. It's a productive strategy, and it has been used fruitfully by scholars who examine bioethics or medicine in popular media. It can illuminate the details of how media texts frame public issues or maintain dominant understandings and ideologies. At the same time, that method distorts important aspects of the mass media by fundamentally changing the audience's experience. People often encounter the media in half-distracted ways, while cooking dinner or waiting in a doctor's office. In these situations, we are more likely to scan than scrutinize, to see general outlines rather than specific details.

to be "signaled" more than informed. In this everyday experience, it is the broader, repeated patterns of media texts that are significant, for it is these that are most likely to register with audiences.

A wide-angle lens reveals that most popular presentations of bioethical issues fall into one overarching genre: the quandary. The "Life or Death Committee" for Seattle Swedish Hospital's new dialysis program (1962), the Karen Ann Quinlan saga (1975-6), the Louise Brown "test-tube baby" case (1978), Barney Clark's artificial heart (1982-3), Baby Jane Doe (1983), Jack Kevorkian's assisted suicides (from 1990 on), and the cloning of Dolly the sheep (1996) all fit the mold, to name just a few. In each, the popular media amplified the conspicuous dilemmas and "hard choices" of moral life in the era of modern medicine.15

The quandary is an enacted rite of moral life that features competing values and principles brought together in some hard or controversial case. While the genre has important variations, one can also offer some generalizations about it: Competing values are typically embedded in contending institutions, individuals, and social practices, so that there are multiple players and forces in the drama. Often, the problems or dilemmas raised are marked as new or unusual.

Also, the quandary is a rite of public moral affliction. As the sociologist of religion Catherine Bell has noted, "rituals of affliction attempt to rectify a state of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered."16 Bioethical quandaries have resulted from the perceived moral disorder brought about by the modern technologies and techniques of medicine. The phrase "playing God" is frequently used in popular and vernacular discussions of these quandaries; a dialysis committee plays God when it decides who gets to use a scarce technology; doctors might play God in actively ending a life; a genetic scientist might do so in creating it. Meanwhile, these occur in a cultural context in which the inherited faith that technology brings god-like progress has been challenged and technology is castigated as a false idol. These are collective cultural afflictions that the popular media has dramatized and helped enact.

Moreover, popular quandaries are played out in distinctively liberal ways. Like other rites of affliction, popular bioethical quandaries draw upon culturally distinct figures who perform specific rituals that respond to and attempt to alleviate the perceived disorder. Instead of summoning a shaman to lay hands, these modern media rituals feature experts who speak and write, often within the sacred civic space of courtrooms and legislatures. Liberalism is a culture of open discussion, not singular proclamation, so these ritual experts deliberate and disagree with one another, a process that liberal standards of journalistic objectivity uphold and represent for the public at large. Journalists oversee the public rite, but liberal rules limit their role in proposing any cure for the affliction. Instead, that answer needs to come from processes of public discourse, which are supposed to occur in both representative institutions (courts, legislatures, the press) and in society at large (where public opinion officially resides). Through this diffuse process, the rite of affliction is publicly enacted.

The paradigmatic example of the genre is the case of Karen Ann Quinlan. This case was also the breakthrough story for popular bioethics—its first media event. In September 1975, Quinlan became the object of massive media attention when, after she had been in a "chronic vegetative state" for five months, her father petitioned to become her legal guardian so that he might order Karen's mechanical respirator disconnected. Three days after his lawyer filed suit in a New Jersey county courthouse, network news crews were stationed on the Quinlan's front lawn. The case quickly generated massive attention: Mr. Quinlan's
lawyer fielded some 150 calls per day, while the doctors hired a public relations specialist to handle news media and shield themselves from a deluge of crank calls they were receiving. The Quinlans themselves received thousands of letters, had hundreds of faith healers appear at their door, and dealt with all modes of journalists (including two who dressed as priests to sneak into Karen Ann’s room, and one who offered $100,000 for a photo of their comatose daughter).17 This was bioethical dilemma as popular spectacle.

The trusted anchors of network television news told Americans of the quandary, which featured a dramatic array of competing moral forces. John Chancellor solemnly intoned, “We have reached a point where machines can be made to cheat death, to prolong life where life could not have been prolonged before.” Others stressed the case’s novelty, that as far as anyone could tell, “nothing like this case has ever come up before.”18 At the center of the drama was Karen Ann Quinlan, visually represented by an endlessly reproduced high school photograph. During the court trials that ensued, artists’ renditions pictured an emaciated Karen Ann in fetal position, tethered to a second dramatic force, the mechanical respirator. Television news drawings often featured the machine’s electric plug and a large “On/Off” switch. Like Karen Ann, this player in the drama could not speak for itself, but journalists reminded us that it represented medical machines that “can now sometimes forestall death almost indefinitely.” Karen Ann’s parents were also key figures in the quandary, devout Irish Catholics tortured by the ordeal who wanted to put their daughter “in the hands of the Lord.” Television close-ups of the couple added intimacy to the story and showed a sincere middle-aged couple standing together in a modest working-class home, grimly resolved to their daughter’s condition. They wanted to place their faith in God, not a respirator.19

Beyond family and machine, the popular quandary was enacted by physicians, lawyers, priests, judges, journalists, and the public at large. The physicians had originally agreed to abide by Mr. Quinlan’s wishes and disconnect the machine, but on further consideration changed their minds, backed by a hospital cognizant of burgeoning malpractice suits. Priests meanwhile guided the Quinlans by drawing upon Catholic thought about preserving human life through “extraordinary” means. Lawyers spoke for nearly everyone: the Quinlans, Karen’s court-appointed guardian, the doctors, the hospital, Morris County, and the state of New Jersey all had their own legal representatives in court. The lawyers represented competing institutions, competing legal principles, and competing moral ideals, and among other things they disagreed

mass media also covered itself; it reminded us that media were massively covering the saga and that “reporters from as far away as Tokyo and London” were witnessing the case and hence marking its significance.20

Haltingly, bioethicists themselves were also brought onto the popular stage constructed through the mass media. Time magazine quoted Princeton’s Paul Ramsey, the Hastings Center’s Robert Veatch, and Arthur Dycks of Harvard, for instance.21 But turning to the bioethics think tanks and academic philosophers was not yet the norm for the news media. In the New York Times, lawyers and physicians provided the quotes, and ethicists were absent, even in a broad focus news feature entitled “Quinlan Case Stirs Debate on Ethics.”22 Bioethicists were similarly absent from the network news, the most important forum for the

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about the most basic legal definition—the criterion for distinguishing life from death. Behind them lay four distinct fonts of moral authority—family, physicians and medical practice, religious tradition, and civic law. The public also joined the process: opinion polls were commissioned and publicized, and people spoke with each other in churches, schools, homes, and no doubt in many hospital rooms.

Journalists en masse presided over the quandary and gave bioethical issues new resonance and legitimacy. At their historical high point for audience size and status, the big three television networks each ran more than thirty stories about Quinlan over a seven-month period. The New York Times and other newspapers ran front-page articles, and the news weeklies each ran long stories. The media event. Thus the emerging scholarly field had only a popular toe-hold. Still, Quinlan represented the beginning of an era in which bioethical issues gained public legitimation through mass-mediated moral quandaries.

In helping to enact moral quandaries like Quinlan’s, the media has arguably done for popular audiences what journals like the Hastings Center Report or Bioethics have done for scholarly communities. As a recent intellectual biography of the field observes, bioethics is “professionally committed to recognizing moral ambiguity,” to inquiring about contested issues and, as The Hastings Center long ago reported its mission, “to advance public and professional understanding of the social and ethical problems arising out of advances in life sciences.”23 The quandary—with
its conflict, novelty, and ambiguity — is at the very core of these scholarly self-understandings. Reports in the popular media may be less nuanced in their exploration of these issues, and perhaps less open-ended in their narrative settlements of them, but this is primarily a difference of style and intended audience. Both mass-mediated quandaries and their print-based scholarly versions are the communicative rituals of liberalm.

The Limits of Conversation: Popular Bioethics as Ritual and Rhetoric

The metaphor of conversation is often used to describe the public face of bioethics, but I think this is a mistake. Albert Jonsen, for instance, who also has some misgivings about media, has called bioethics a "public discourse carried on by many people in many settings, ... a persistent and purposeful conversation open to diverse participants." While conversation and its relative, deliberation, are noble communicative processes which should be pursued in many forums, they do not get at the work done by the mass media. Media may stimulate conversation, but media are not themselves conversations, and rarely do they even model conversation particularly well. Conversation is an intimate mode of communication practiced by a finite number of people and guided by local rules of decorum. The mass media offers none of these things. It is rather the commercialized spectacle of the fast-paced and fleeting world of the late-modern popular public sphere. If one holds too tightly to metaphors of conversation and deliberation, the popular media is bound to disappoint.

Bioethicists should embrace popular media, not as a mode of conversation or extended deliberation, but rather as a forum for status conferment, ritual enactment, and, ultimately, "eloquence in an electronic age." Where the ancient Greeks had their agora, modern societies have mass media. Both are popular forums for displaying the group's most important issues, and both are governed by the art of rhetoric. Aristotle long ago defined rhetoric as the art of speaking about contingent matters to the public at large, and that is still what bioethicists do when they appear in mass media. News media may be a realm of sound bites, but the rhetorical tradition has long led to the production of good sound bites: "Give me liberty or give me death," "A government of the people, by the people, and for the people," and "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" are just three good examples. In a modern democracy, mass media is the big time, the national agora where issues and ways of thought must appear if they are really going to matter. In Aristotle's world, the sophists were some of the greatest practitioners of the art of rhetoric. Bioethics needs its own present-day sophists who can speak forcefully in the moral dramas of contemporary life.

References


2. J. Carey, Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), ch. 1. My discussion of transmission and ritual differs slightly from Carey's, but it is generally consistent.


10. The classic sociological statement on the sacred and profane is E. Durkheim, Elementary Forms of Religious Life (New York: Free Press, 1965 [1912]). For a recent extension of it, see ref. 6, Marvin and Ingle, Blood Sacrifice and the Nation, chs. 2-3.


13. For two recent interesting examples of closer reads of medicine and bioethics in popular media, see A.J. Wagner, "Resident Bodies: The Sites and Stories of Illness-

14. On the notion of moral quandaries, see E. Pincus, "Quandary Ethics," in Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductionism in Ethics (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), p. 13-36. For other brief statements about the narrative conventions of popular bioethics, see Crigger, "Media and Bioethics," 435-40; see Elliott, "Media and Medicine," 423-424; see Murray, "Mediagenic Ethics," 3-4. The expose, another staple of popular media, is the other main genre of popular bioethics. Like the quandary, the expose features moral conflict when a whistleblower or investigative journalist draws attention to people, practices, or institutions which seemingly depart from accepted moral norms. Unlike the quandary, the expose operates from a more stable moral base that results in the conflict being portrayed less as a dilemma and more as an act of wrongdoing. The coverage in the New York Times of the Tuskegee syphilis story (1972) was probably the first important popular expose in bioethics.

15. "Hard Choices" was the apt title of a PBS documentary in the early 1980s, a widely mentioned exploration that presented the quandary for the mid- to upper-brow public.


26. Owing in large part to Plato's condemnation of them, the sophists have long been the subject of derision. For a more sympathetic account of their craft, see J. Poulakos, Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

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