

BIOETHICISTS IN THE NEWS:
THE EVOLVING ROLE OF BIOETHICISTS
AS EXPERT SOURCES IN SCIENCE AND MEDICAL STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Journalists have increasingly used bioethicists as expert sources in stories on science, medicine, and technology with strong ethical ramifications. Yet little is known about how and why journalists select bioethicists as expert sources, which bioethicists are used most often, the perspectives they offer, and the roles they fill. This research uses news routines, news values, agenda-building theory and framing theory to examine the use of bioethicists as expert sources in six newspapers between 1992 and 2006. A quantitative content analysis of 456 stories, a qualitative framing analysis on a subset of that coverage, and interviews with a science or medical reporter at each newspaper provided converging lines of inquiry. This study finds that one bioethicist is quoted in the vast majority of stories although bioethicists have a wide range of backgrounds, credentials, religions, biases, and viewpoints. In addition, a small handful of media-savvy bioethicists have become habitual sources. A bioethicist who is directly quoted is apt to provide opinion rather than fact and is much more likely to serve as a critic or skeptic on a bioethical issue than an advocate. Moreover, the findings show that bioethicists are most often used as expert sources in stories on end-of-life issues; conflict of interest, fraud, and unethical behavior; human stem cell research and cloning; and healthcare allocation than on other topics. But this research shows that in being more reactive than proactive, bioethicists and the public relations practitioners who represent them tend to respond to the media agenda on bioethical issues rather than vigorously help to build it.

