

Public Abstract

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Title:Bioethicists in the News: The Evolving Role of Bioethicists as Expert Sources in Science and Medical Stories

Journalists have increasingly used bioethicists as expert sources to help them make sense of the complex scientific, medical, and technological topics they cover and the ethical issues that often accompany them. Yet little is known about how and why reporters choose bioethicists as expert sources, which bioethicists are used most often, what perspectives they add to stories, and the roles bioethicists play in stories. This research used three methods to analyze the use of bioethicists as expert sources in six American newspapers between 1992 and 2006. It examined both the ways in which reporters research and write stories on bioethical issues “ or news production “ and the stories themselves “ the news product. This research found that a single bioethicist was used as an expert in the vast majority of stories despite the fact that bioethicists have a wide range of backgrounds, religions, viewpoints, and biases. In addition, a few media savvy bioethicists were used as experts over and over in stories. This research also found that bioethicists were apt to provide opinion rather than facts for stories, and were much more likely to criticize or raise questions about bioethical issues than to serve as neutral interpreters or moral arbiters among different viewpoints expressed by other sources. This study is significant because bioethicists are likely to remain in the media spotlight because scientific, medical, and technological advances will continue to make news during the 21st century. Understanding how reporters use bioethicists as experts extends knowledge of how journalists cover these important topics.