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Tony Nicklinson gained worldwide attention throughout August 2012 when the British courts refused to assure him that a doctor, who might help him die, would not face prosecution for murder.

Nicklinson had earlier made his case to the courts with the support of wife Jane, and daughters Lauren and Beth. Tony suffered a stroke in 2005 and was diagnosed with locked-in syndrome (LIS), meaning that although he experienced no loss of brain function, he was fully paralysed and could only communicate through eye movement. It is important to note that Tony did not want to die immediately, he only wanted to have the reassurance that he could choose the moment when he wanted to (Rusbridger, 2012). Within a week after the ruling Tony refused to eat, was diagnosed with pneumonia, and died on the 22nd of August 2012, at his home, aged 58.

This essay will examine the news coverage of Tony Nicklinson, to argue that there are certain reasons why news events are selected and that the makers of the news play a significant and engaging role in the portrayal of a news event by presenting it in way that will serve their own needs and those of the audience. This argument will be reinforced through an analysis of articles from three newspapers – British based newspapers *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*, and New Zealand's *The Dominion Post* – where it is evident that political, economic, and socio-cultural influences shape the news, and a democratic function is being served in order to encourage active involvement in debates. This essay will refer to coverage throughout 2012, with a strong focus on the days leading up to the ruling and Tony's death in the latter half of August 2012.

The political economy model is just one theoretical approach to studying the news. Harrison observes that this involves analysing the complex relationship between ownership of news corporations and strategies used in producing news media content (26). News content can be influenced by a range of factors, including the operation of news organizations within certain political systems. *The Dominion Post* is a daily broadsheet that is centrally aligned, politically, but also slightly left-wing and liberal (Van Belle, 2012). The *Daily Mail* is a daily British tabloid newspaper with a traditional right-wing/conservative political alignment (Nessheim 351). This newspaper currently supports the leader of the United Kingdom's (UK) Conservative Party and Prime Minister of the UK, David Cameron. The conservative political philosophy is based on maintaining traditional values and "established practices," while being cautious of attempts to establish "new social arrangements" (Christman 127). Although *The Guardian* is also a daily British newspaper, it appeals to a different audience. *The Guardian* is published in the Berliner format and supports the views of the UK's Labour Party and

Liberal Democrats. Hence, it is aligned to the left and has a social-liberal editorial stance (Nesheim 351). Those considered social-liberal on political matters place strong importance on freedom and equality in society.

The process of agenda setting helps to draw our attention to certain news stories and not others. Medoff and Kaye note that news outlets influence what the public perceive as significant news: the more coverage a news story gets, “the more important it seems to the audience” (263). Tony Nicklinson received extensive coverage in both *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*, and to a lesser extent *The Dominion Post*. In other words, the audience are repeatedly exposed to specific news stories in the hope that they will pay attention. In addition, Cohen argues that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (qtd. in Steinberg 263). In other words, news outlets cannot make their audiences care about Nicklinson, and cannot necessarily change the opinions of individuals on the debate about assisted suicide and euthanasia, but can make it hard for the public to ignore what is prioritised in the news.

Leading on from this, Harrison lists several elements of “newsworthiness” (137). For example, news events are more likely to be selected if, for example, they have meaning and relevance to the audience (Harrison 137). When Nicklinson took his case to the High Court in Britain, he essentially wanted to change the law on murder. This law change would effectively make “He wanted me to end his life” a legitimate plea for someone accused of murder (Manning, 2012). Both *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail* have described Nicklinson’s case as a “landmark legal battle,” because it was the first time such a case had been granted a full hearing in a British Court. As reported in *The Guardian*, judge of the case Lord Justice Toulon emphasized the immense repercussions a law change could have when, after giving the ruling, he stated that the courts do not have the power to make such a change: “These are matters for parliament to decide, representing society as a whole, after parliament scrutiny, and not for ... individual cases” (qtd. in Topping, 2012). Therefore, this case is newsworthy because a law change would affect everyone and not just Nicklinson. Even if there was no law change, it would still have high consequences for all British people and not just the audience of the news.

Harrison also notes that news events are more likely to be put on the agenda if similar events are already in the news (137). New Zealand Labour Party member Maryan Street is currently drafting a member's bill called the End of Life Choice Bill, in wanting to legalise euthanasia, and on August 23, *The Dominion Post* sourced New Zealand Prime Minister John Key who stated that "a lot" of euthanasia already happens in hospitals (qtd. in Forbes, 2012). The very next day, various doctors from around New Zealand took umbrage at Key's comments, declaring that they "never practise euthanasia," and that the comments could "seriously damage" trust in hospital care (qtd. in Torrie, 2012). Both *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail* reported on another individual, only referred to as Martin, who also suffered from LIS. Therefore, part of the reason that these news outlets reported on Nicklinson was because there were other current events that were similar. By reporting on related events, these news outlets are able to further reinforce what they believe is important news.

The process of gatekeeping can help to reinforce political ideologies. According to Harrison, gatekeeping is a "form of subjectivity" where news content is selected "according to its perceived ability to inform or conform ... centred on the constant assessment of rejection and acceptance" (Harrison 195). In other words, a filtering of information takes place because gatekeepers of the news control what gets published and what does not. Through their choices, gatekeepers reinforce their political ideologies and create a biased representation of reality. Gatekeeping can function through using certain sources and discarding others in order to illustrate a particular political position. As mentioned above, the *Daily Mail* is a conservatively aligned newspaper and there are several articles published on the Tony Nicklinson story that reinforce this.

Schudson points out that news is not what happens but what someone says has happened or will happen (127). In one article, a *Daily Mail* reporter argues that the liberal media must remember the risks of "copycat syndrome" and "suicide contagion" (Thompson, 2012). Thompson believes that constant media reporting on suicide will lead to imitative behaviour or the assumption that suicide is the solution to life's problems. Thompson backs up his claims with reference to the World Health Organization, British charity Samaritans, and the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), which "deals with complaints about the editorial content of newspapers" (PCC, 2012). To further reinforce his position Thompson draws on figures from the UK's Office of National Statistics, which show that suicides have increased by ten percent over recent years, and from Oregon in the United States of America (USA) where, since assisted suicide was legalised in 1997, rates have risen faster, and are a

third higher, than the national average. According to Schudson, the higher the news source, the more legitimate the claims seem (130). Therefore, Thompson incorporates data from world bodies and various organizations in order to maintain an efficient argument about the risks of the media's frequent reporting on suicides and depictions of lives as not worth living. Put simply, Thompson is trying to prove to the audience that this is the reality.

Harrison notes that news can also be studied from a cultural perspective (29). Culture can be thought of as a "tool kit" of symbols, hidden meanings, and world views that news outlets can use (Ettema 290). This process is known as framing, which occurs when "some aspects of a perceived reality" are made "more salient than others" in order to promote "a certain way of looking at the world" (Entman 54). In other words, reporters will emphasize certain elements of a story and give little importance to others to put across their stance on the issue in question. The conservative stance of the *Daily Mail* is emphasized through various reporters' attacks on the liberal media. Thompson describes the "pro euthanasia barrage" by the liberal media as "shoddy" and metaphorically compares them to "cheerleaders," and Gyngell is critical of an "obsessively rights oriented culture." Additionally, Pitcher labels euthanasia supporters as "arrogant" and thinks that doctors will not be able to handle the pressure of ending a human life, or as he puts it, "doing the dirty work." Essentially, the *Daily Mail* is immersing its audience with a certain set of ideas, while at times dismissing the pain that Tony Nicklinson and his family are going through.

Schudson argues that news events are coloured "to advance a political, economic or ideological aim" (27). Editor of *The Guardian* Alan Rusbridger frames Nicklinson's situation as "tragic" and believes parliamentarians are "shrinking one of their most fundamental responsibilities: to address the issues raised by changes in science." Other *Guardian* reporters concur. Polly Toynbee states that "the law must be changed to end such brutal suffering," and quotes Nicklinson himself, who described his life as a "living nightmare." Hannah Betts tells a story of her own grandmother who was "tortured into living by a medical system that will not let her go," and is concerned with contemporary culture's disregard for "quality of life" and obsession with "youth" and "immortality." Put simply, *The Guardian* has taken the opposite stance of the *Daily Mail* through the use of various words and phrases that imply hopelessness. These examples show how news outlets can use framing in order to direct the audience to a certain viewpoint, in the hope that they will be influenced and adopt the same opinion.

Even though *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail* have distinct differences in their presentation on the Tony Nicklinson story because of their contrasting political alignments, they also have similarities. Although the *Daily Mail* is aligned conservatively, some of its coverage on Tony Nicklinson can be considered social-liberal. For example, Tom Rawstone comes across as sympathetic in his article, where he not only mentions the pain Tony Nicklinson must have gone through while hearing the ruling, but also quotes Tony's daughter Lauren, who states that her dad would rather starve himself to death than spend "30 years living in locked-in ... it is so unbelievably painful to see someone you love so much hurt every single day and be able to do nothing about it." Likewise, *The Guardian's* coverage of Tony Nicklinson is somewhat contradictory because it is slightly conservative at times. In one article, Deborah Orr argues that "enshrining self-sacrifice in law risks making life yet more uncomfortable for the majority of us." Orr's later discussion tends to reflect the political alignment of the *Daily Mail*. Orr describes suicide as "psychologically contagious," believes the "careless publicising of suicide can lead to inflection of the vulnerable," and states that media reporting on suicide should be undertaken with "strict guidelines."

The reason this balance of coverage occurs is because news organizations want to attract the widest possible audience. The bell-shaped curve or normal distribution model reflects the structure of any society, including the political spectrum (Van Belle, "The Business of News"). In other words, most people in any audience or society will fall within a certain range, and the coverage of news outlets should reflect this centre in order to maximise audience numbers. In essence, neither *The Guardian* nor *Daily Mail* is radically aligned to their respective political positions because this would marginalize and distance the majority of the audience. With regards to the *Daily Mail*, the current leading party in Britain is the Conservative Party and therefore a large proportion of the audience holds this position. The *Daily Mail* would not be able to justify its conservative position economically if there was not an audience for it. However, to increase its reach and appeal, the *Daily Mail* also caters for and serves the interests of those who voted for the more liberal or left-aligned parties.

Another point of similarity between the three news outlets analysed in this essay is that they all display characteristics of Habermas' notion of the public sphere. According to Harrison, the public sphere "mediates" between the society and the state and it should be a place that all citizens have access to (108-110). In addition, Schudson states the news media is "vital" to the opening of this public sphere in order to stimulate discussion and allow debate (202). The vast majority of the *Daily*

Mails' articles on Tony Nicklinson contain a comments section underneath. Doughty and Ledwith's report on the day of the court ruling includes over eight hundred and fifty comments from the public, and Salkeld and Evans' report on Tony's death contains in the vicinity of fifteen hundred. The purpose of this is to allow the public to contribute to the debate and get an informed idea of what other citizens are thinking.

Harrison points out that freedom of expression is a "basic condition" of progress and that the public have the right to criticise (103). *The Dominion Post* features user contributions on its website. In relation to comments by John Key and various doctors on euthanasia, a letter from a public individual who had witnessed euthanasia being practiced in Palmerston North was published (Mackie, 2012). Subsequently, another letter was published from another member of the public who disagreed with a previous "anti-euthanasia" article by columnist Sean Plunkett (Barber, 2012). *The Guardian* website contains a section entitled "Comment is free," and many of the Tony Nicklinson articles were written by journalists working in this department. A click on the "About us" link explains the purpose of this component of the website: "we host hundreds of discussions every week on a wide range of topics ... We publish a plurality of voices, but our centre of gravity as a progressive, liberal, left-leaning newspaper is clear." In other words, *The Guardian* is clearly abiding by its values by encouraging the public to contribute to news issues. They recognize that the audience needs to be able to express their views to allow the proper functioning of a democratic society.

According to Harrison, news events are more likely to be selected if they contain "dramatic occurrences that can be sensationalized" (137). In order to sensationalize events, news outlets tend to place emphasis upon elements that could generate emotional responses from the audience. Rowe believes that a "more intensive use of visual material" is one characteristic of the "sensationalization" of news (351). Although the three news outlets analysed have their differences, they are similar in that they all display attributes of sensationalism. The front page of *The Dominion Post's* "World" section on the 24th of August 2012 contains a large, close-up image of Tony's face at the moment he learned about the High Court's decision. On the 16th of August 2012, the day of the ruling, *The Guardian* posted a video on its website of this exact moment where close-up camera shots of Tony's face show him crying and clearly distraught. An online *Daily Mail* article also published on the 16th of August contains several large images that follow the same theme, including Tony's wife watching him cry and wiping away his tears (Doughty and Ledwith, 2012). Additionally, further down this same

article is a sequence of images showing Tony before he suffered his stroke that include quad biking, skydiving, and photos with his family, essentially living an eventful and pleasant life. The purpose of this is to bring about an affectionate reaction from the viewer. By showing images of Tony before and after the stroke, the viewer is able to make a sympathetic comparison and develop an attachment to how Tony is feeling at the present. Put simply, these news outlets want the audience to feel Tony's pain, care about his suffering, and wonder what it would be like to be trapped in such a situation.

In conclusion, through an analysis of coverage from *The Dominion Post*, *The Guardian*, and *Daily Mail*, it is clear that all three news outlets agree on the fact that the events surrounding Tony Nicklinson are significant and that the public deserve to have a space for discussion and sharing opinions. By giving Tony Nicklinson extensive coverage, this story has been put high on the agenda. The news media recognize that the court case is newsworthy because it has high consequences, there are parallels with other current events, and it could potentially affect millions of people. However through the processes of gatekeeping and framing, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* have somewhat distorted the reality of the Tony Nicklinson event. Both have offered varying interpretations in order to reinforce their contrasting political values with the effect of appealing to different audiences. Still, they are careful to not come across as too radical in their views, and somewhat balance their political biases out in order to maintain as larger readership as possible.

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