The Right to Die Legally and Peacefully

In an editorial article titled "California should revive right-to-die legislation", that appeared on the *LA* *Times* website on 30 October 2014, the LA Times Editorial Board argues for reintroducing right-to-die legislation due to the high-profile case of Brittany Maynard. Citing a recent Gallup Poll that the majority of American citizens support the right of the terminally ill to end their lives peacefully, physician assisted suicide remains legal in only a handful of states. The Board suggests several possible reasons for previous legislation failures in California which are countered with evidence from Oregon's Death With Dignity Act that has long been in effect. In this essay I will introduce concepts of slanting presented by Newman and Genevieve Birk (351-3) to analyze how this issue is presented in the media. By utilizing these principles of slanting, I will demonstrate how this article slants in favor of the issue.

The right-to-die issue has been in and out of the media since 1994 when Oregon Ballot Measure 16 passed by 51% (State of Oregon). Since then, the matter has been challenged legally, all the way up to the Supreme Court (Death With Dignity). Peter Richardson explores the right-to-die from the patient and physician perspective in his award-winning documentary released in 2011, *How to Die in Oregon*. Both sides of the argument were presented in *The New York Times* "Room for Debate" section. The specific article I address was published during the public campaign of Brittany Maynard who sought to legally end her life in a manner and time of her choosing after receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis.

The intended audience for this article are citizens who support the legal right-to-die for the terminally ill. Or, rather registered voters and lawmakers who support this right. It also speaks to citizens who are undecided. The LA Times Editorial Board makes their claim to majority support by citing polling statistics, " The Gallup Poll has found for 20 years that about 70% of Americans support allowing physicians to help terminally ill patients end their lives 'by some painless means'." They further assert that, "Surveys of Californians by the Field Poll have mirrored those results". The implication of such a statement is that, with majority support, it is time to enact a law. While the LA Times directly addresses Californians, it is the fourth most widely distributed newspaper in the US according to the Huffington Post. It is read by more than just Californians.

Employing the concept of slanting by use of charged language spelled out by Birk and Birk, the article is slanted in favor of the right-to-die. This is evident in the description of Brittany Maynard and her situation when they write, "She's an attractive spokeswoman, only 29 years old, rational and articulate on the subject of why she plans to end her life....before her aggressive brain cancer can rob her of cognitive function and impose a painful, seizure-ridden death. Her youth sharpens the tragedy". The use of words such as attractive, rational and articulate present her favorably. Following that favorable description with words like aggressive, rob, impose, painful and seizure-ridden death illicit sympathy for her situation. The commendation of her contrasted with the vilification of her disease seeks to slant the piece in favor of the issue.

Another principle of slanting outlined by Birk and Birk is slanting by emphasis. An example of this appears in the closing paragraph. It begins, "Hospice care has gone a long way toward providing terminally ill patients with comfort during their last months, but it's not for everyone." This segues into a negative description of traditional end-of-life care. The fact that some may not choose hospice care overshadows the preceding admission of its improved quality due to its placement in the sentence. This is further eclipsed by the negative description of hospice care that follows. The paragraph (and article) close by remarking, "right-to-death laws do not impose death on the very sick. Rather, they allow people who face imminent death to do so peacefully and without agony." The use of "rather" seeks to clarify the intended function of right-to-die laws. The final sentence, "Society should not rob them of that right." emphasizes their position on the issue as it is the ending of both the paragraph and the article. This imparts a lasting impression in favor of the issue.

While the slanting in this article is often subtle, once combined, it strongly advocates in favor of the right-to-die. I admit my own long-standing support led me to select this article over others. In my analysis, I applied the slanting concepts laid out by Birk and Birk to identify the bias inherent in this article. We are surrounded by bias, although we are often unaware of it. The deliberate choice of words, and the placement of those words, alters the message they deliver. Bringing this bias into awareness makes for more engaged and analytical readers.

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