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A History of News about Death

There are some common accusations about the way in which today’s news media cover death and dying: death on television is portrayed in increasingly graphic ways, news programs are full of death and suffering, and death is being more and more sensationalized by the media. The list goes on in a similar vein. The general perception is that we live in a time of over-saturation of violent and graphic portrayals of death and dying. News broadcasts are ostensibly full of wars, crimes and disasters, creating an image that things have never been worse. And as news organizations are competing as never before for the attention of audiences, this supposedly leads to increasingly sensationalized news coverage, where the old motto ‘when it bleeds it leads’ rules.

While the news today certainly contains graphic and shocking displays of death and dying now and then, it is difficult to generalize about a perceived increase without comparative examples. So before we make sweeping assertions and argue that things have never been this bad before, we first need to look at what it has actually been like. Too often, normative statements are made with insufficient context, and it is necessary that we examine how death and dying has been on public display in the past, before making any meaningful comparisons. As this chapter demonstrates, the display of death and dying in the public sphere – and particularly in the news – has a checkered history. There have been times when blood and gore were quite prevalent in public discourse, while at other times they may have been hidden, or – as Mellor and Shilling (1993) have famously argued – sequestered. In fact, the extent to which death is present or absent in public discourse has been part of a major debate among scholars in the history and sociology of death and dying.

We therefore need to be very careful not to make any simplistic assertions about the nature and visibility of death in the news media. Rather,
the coverage of death in the news needs to be seen in context. The context, that is, of the society and age in which these representations circulate. In his influential book *The Power of News*, Michael Schudson (1995, p. 203) has argued against the ‘retrospective wishful thinking’ that has occurred from time to time when scholars have argued about the existence of a golden age of journalism. News media are a reflection of the society they operate in, and as such it is important to examine wider societal developments and situate the representation of death in news against this background.

For instance, it is impossible to talk about only one discourse of death in the news. As this book demonstrates, the coverage of death and dying in the news – and the resulting scholarly approaches – are much too complex to be able to reduce death in the news to one paradigm. This is because death itself cannot be tackled from a reductionist perspective. In fact, the sociologist Glennys Howarth argues that death is immensely complex and cannot even be reduced to a basic distinction between public and private presence. ‘It appears in both spheres, in expected and unexpected forms, natural and unnatural, to the willing and to the reluctant’ (Howarth, 2007, p. 35). It is important to heed Howarth’s warning when embarking on any analysis of how death is covered in the news; and this will certainly be the case when examining how death has been portrayed over the centuries. Quite often, the context (frequently a political one) is important in our understanding of, for example, why coverage was quite graphic in reporting during the Vietnam War, as compared to the near absence of any kind of death in the reporting of the first Gulf War. A comparison between these two wars alone should put to rest any undifferentiated view that the coverage of death has become consistently more graphic.

Before embarking on a historical overview of the coverage of death in the news, however, we first need to look at broader sociological developments. The next section sketches an outline of existing studies into the sociology of death and dying, in order to shed some light on how societies have dealt with the end of life throughout history.

**The history of death and dying in society**

At the crux of the issue of the (mass) mediation of death and dying is an argument over whether death is present or absent in public discourse, in particular in the news media. Researchers argue that the way in which death is portrayed in the media gives us clues as to how society views and experiences death. Up until the last two decades of the