

# Media Coverage of Euthanasia in Italy: The Controversial Case of Eluana Englaro

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## ABSTRACT

News is never impersonal or totally impartial. Journalists and communicators are aware of the fact that are the bad news to sell (bad news = good news). It follows that criteria of objectivity, completeness and verifiability are sacrificed on the altar of an interpretation that is partial, ideological, emotional and linguistically misleading. Also in the healthcare fields, "good information and communication" is struggling to establish itself. In the 2009 Eluana Englaro case - a "vegetative state" patient whose death by starvation was imposed by an Italian judge -, a dramatic re-enactment of a story of euthanasia, the two forms of ill-informed public and social communication, have found a two fold negative spread. From the point of view of mass media, the illustration of the story of this no longer young woman, but always represented in the press and on television stations with a photo taken in a young age, continues to make us reflect on the role of poorly objective and manipulative messages to the public opinion up to our days. And this is worrisome since connected to a dramatic story of the so-called border, a fact that raises dilemmas and encourages the public to reflect on ethically sensitive issues on life and death and touches all of us. Similarly, from the point of view of health communication, it is an incomplete if not erroneous prey for the scoop and for certain prudery or just taste of horror-show of the new information. This poor alliance has fostered the myth of Eluana favorable to euthanasia before the accident, by erroneous reports even described as intubated, attached to a machine, without conscience, a "plant" deprived of human dignity or even brain dead. After 6232 days - as with sadism illustrated by some newspapers and television news programs - Eluana "died", "Eluana died", as the last linguistic infamy because, rather, she had been imposed a cruel and infamous death several years from the accident that resulted in a "vegetative state"; from that gruesome end the story and the drama of Eluana is still a wound within the Italian society and raises disturbing questions also regarding the silence, omissions, and deficiencies in the system of information and communication in those days. In our contribution we intended to investigate some of the most relevant flaws in communication to rethink - and this is a warning for us - the role of ethics and the influence of media in general. The story of Eluana, the poor scenario and the pietistic statements of some members of the medical profession, arise as additional elements in the drama. For us, the hope that the two systems of information and communication, here analyzed in their most degenerate aspects, do not continue to follow the same direction, is always alive.

## Bad News vs Ethic news

Disclosing bioethics issues in the media is not something simple, neither neutral, as we have reported in our work that denounces the lack of scientific and ethical seriousness of certain media, especially those of the press that, when dealing with the so-called ethically sensitive issues - this is the term that the journalism use for the most egregious cases of bioethics - have the habit or stigma to provide or convey a poorly ethical information that is also scientifically implausible. This, on the basis of the reliability of scientific journalism, is unpleasant to say the least, if not embarrassing. On the Englaro case there has been, in fact, a crescendo of bad news or information piloted by a propagandistic point of view, and news that were incomplete if not flawed from a medical point of view. With the result of confusing and dividing even more the audiences and provoking or creating a false public opinion for or against euthanasia to be applied or not to Eluana Englaro. Presenting, therefore, euthanasia as "the best solution", the last pitiful gesture of self-determination on a woman deprived of autonomy and free conscience, but not of life, was the final act of tragedy by the media that still feeds the crisis of esteem and confidence in the fourth power. In conclusion, from the data that we present, perhaps the time has come to recast the popular distinction between bad news and good news, by affirming that quite often even good news is not ethical news, but deceitful bad-information meant to change the truth.

**BAD NEWS = GOOD NEWS**

**BAD NEWS = \$\$\$**

**GOOD NEWS ≠ ETHICAL NEWS**

## ELUANA ENGLARO'S STORY

The first time the Italian mass media had taken an interest in the story of a young woman in vegetative state from Lecce, a town in southern Italy, after a motor vehicle accident, was in the year 2000 when Eluana's father, Giuseppe Englaro, explicitly applied for euthanasia. At that time, the Head of the Health Ministry, Umberto Veronesi, gave him his full support and made the famous statement, taken back by all the Italian newspapers, "euthanasia is an action of mercy". Such declaration was immediately contested by Cardinal Elio Sgreccia who, in the columns of "Il Giornale", wrote: "Dear Veronesi, it is no merciful to kill". After many legal actions and appeals, a prophetic sentence was reached on November 13th, 2008: the Supreme Court of Cassation, to United Sections, rejected the appeal of the Public prosecutor's office in Milan against the order of the Court of Appeal in Milan that authorized the removal of the nasogastric tube. The news conquered immediately the first pages of the newspapers. Applying the U.N. Convention on the rights of people with disabilities, the Head of the Health, Labour and Social Affairs took an action addressed to the Presidents of the Regions in which he stated that persistent vegetative state patients, due to their serious neurological disabilities, should be granted life sustaining measures, that is feeding and hydration. Once more the debate is turned on, and both jurists and columnists occupy sheets and columns to explain or to contest the opportunity of the ministerial action, claiming interference or exalting the order as a brave provision. The procedure that gradually suspended Eluana's food and water began on February



5th, 2009 while, at the same time, the Government prepared a decree of urgency to forbid the suspension of hydration and feeding "to subjects not able to take care of themselves". But the Italian President refused to sign it. On February 9th, 2009 Eluana Englaro died. The autopsy by Dr. Moreschi showed that Eluana had died of "a cardiac

arrest caused by dehydration"; this means that if hydration and feeding had not been suspended, she probably would have been still alive.

## First Page of Italian Newspapers

Newspaper	First Page
<p><b>Corriere della Sera</b> <i>Eluana has died, it is battle in the Senate</i></p> <p>(Eluana muore, scontro in senato)</p>	
<p><b>La Repubblica</b> <i>Eluana's ordeal has finished</i></p> <p>(Eluana, il calvario è finito)</p>	
<p><b>La Stampa</b> <i>8.10 pm: Eluana has died</i></p> <p>(ore 20.10: Eluana muore)</p>	
<p><b>Il Messaggero</b> <i>Eluana's heart has stopped</i></p> <p>(Eluana, il cuore si è fermato)</p>	
<p><b>Il Giornale</b> <i>She has been killed</i></p> <p>(L'hanno Uccisa)</p>	
<p><b>Il Mattino</b> <i>Eluana has died</i></p> <p>(Eluana è morta)</p>	
<p><b>Avvenire</b> <i>She is in God's arms</i></p> <p>(Dio ora stringe la sua mano)</p>	
<p><b>Libero</b> <i>The Senate is ready to decide for her but she dies suddenly</i></p> <p>(Loro si svegliano e lei muore subito)</p>	
<p><b>L'Unità</b> <i>R.I.P</i></p> <p>(In Pace)</p>	
<p><b>Liberazione</b> <i>Finally free</i></p> <p>(Libera)</p>	

## Popular Italian TV News Channels

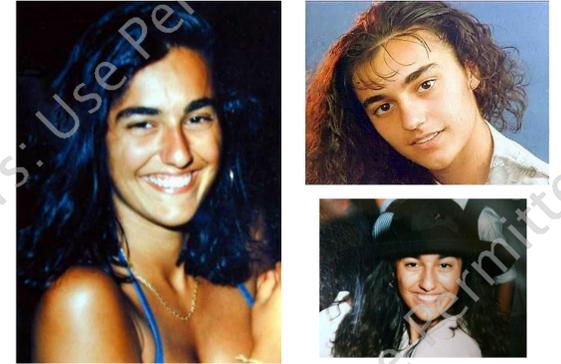


In this table we have analyzed the 7 Italian's most popular TV Channels. Specifically, we have analyzed: Time, Viewers (in millions) and Share.

	Rai Uno	Rai Due	Rai Tre	Canale 5	Italia Uno	Rete 4	La 7
Program	Porta a Porta	X Factor	Chi l'ha visto	Grande Fratello	Deja Vu	TG 4 Ed. Straord.	Infedele
Program starts	21:28:33	21:14:37	21:13:13	21:26:31	21:14:03	20:51:41	21:10:00
Program ends	24:06:51	24:30:17	23:11:10	24:06:58	23:37:28	23:04:49	23:49:55
Viewers in millions	4,302	2,901	2,041	7,920	3,701	1,325	0,824
% share	17.31%	12.25%	7.16%	31.78%	13.43%	4.58%	3.10%

## Mass Medias on Eluana

From the point of view of mass mass media, the illustration of the story of this no longer young woman, but always represented in the press and on television stations with a photo taken in a young age and before the accident, continues to make us reflect up to our days on the role of poorly objective and manipulative messages to the public opinion.



## Conclusions



In the Italian society the events and then the death of Eluana Englaro are to date an open wound in the consciences and in the public opinion. After many years new questions still arise, especially in reference to the ethical issues in communication, mainly in reference to a more thoughtful and peaceful reflection and critical reading on the world of the media and their way to introduce Eluana's story and sad epilogue, especially during her final and painful days.

From here the idea of our work, and a more careful consideration on the presentation of this young woman by the Italian press, a woman in vegetative state who, for the greatest part of the commentators, was without a chance, "living a life not worth living" and, above all, because Eluana was also "attached to a machine" (but this was false!). Many articles imploring for Eluana a "sweet" death came along and were built to impress the reader through a representation of the clinical picture of Eluana, that was incomplete if not voluntarily partial and incorrect. And, if in terms of influences - predictable they were for some but not justifiable for others - the fact that on the Englaro's story the journalistic headings, each with its own weight, sided or didn't side for the euthanasia, clear is the condemnation of the profession, not only deontologically, but also from a point of view of scientific journalism, for its incomplete and untruthful commentaries. Today this seems enough to make the public opinion reconsider Eluana's tragic end.

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