Individual Claims-making in the Terri Schiavo Case

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Abstract
This article uses unique data to explore individual claims-making on the Terri Schiavo case. We analyze 2,509 e-mails sent to Jeb Bush and 1,182 newspaper stories about the Schiavo case to assess how mass media, claims-makers, and individual experience affect the frames and identities used to support or oppose intervention on Terri’s behalf. We find that the frames individuals use vary according to whether they support Bush’s involvement in the case. In addition, we find that the frames individuals use in their claims-making do not always mirror those discussed in mass media. Specifically, the frequency with which e-mailers discuss particular ideas varies according to the engagement of claims-makers on the issue as well as the complexity of the frame. Finally, we find that some individuals do deploy identities strategically in their e-mails. Opponents of intervention, for instance, use their political identities as Republicans to urge Bush to stay out of the case. Not all identity deployment, however, corresponds with support or opposition to Bush’s involvement on the Schiavo case. Individuals use their familial and religious identities to both support and oppose intervention. We conclude with a discussion of the relevance of these findings for understanding claims-making in the twenty-first century.

Keywords
communication and information technologies, collective action and social movements, political sociology, framing, identity

Social scientists are interested in the effects of claims-making on American politics. Indeed, precisely what ideas circulate and shape how individuals think about and act on political issues have been core questions for sociologists, political scientists, and communication scholars (Entman 2003; Fraser and Kick 2000; Gamson 1992; Iyengar 1987; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982; Koopmans and Statham 1999). In sociology, analyses of claims-making are a veritable industry, generating important insights regarding the construction of social problems and the actors, or claims-makers, interested in promoting their particularistic understandings of the world (Best 1987, 1995; Glassner 2000; Gusfield 1981). We still know little, however, about whether (or how) individuals use the frames, or interpretive designs, constructed by claims-makers in their personal communications.

This gap in sociological understanding is largely a function of the methodological challenges associated with studying claims-making at the individual level. Scholars rarely have

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access to personal communications; the precise data necessary to explore how individuals construct their arguments relative to political targets. Instead, researchers typically rely on observations of individuals’ comprehension after exposure to carefully crafted media treatments (De Vreese 2004; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982; Iyengar and Simon 1993), focus groups to probe how individuals process claims circulated via mass media (Gamson 1992), or observations and interviews to explore individual claims-making in accessible settings such as civic, recreational, and news groups (Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Eliasoph 1996; Polletta and Lee 2006). Although useful, each strategy relies on methodological interventions (such as asking questions or introducing topics) that deliberately (or inadvertently) influence how individuals frame their claims. This article reflects an effort to overcome some of the methodological challenges noted above. Our analyses, which draw on 2,509 e-mails sent to Florida Governor Jeb Bush in response to his efforts to reinsert the hydration and nutrition tubes of Terri Schiavo, allow for in-depth examination of two key aspects of claims-making. First, to assess the impact of media discourse and claims-makers on individual understandings of political issues, we examine the frames circulating in 1,182 media stories and determine how individuals draw on these in their own claims-making. Second, we analyze whether individuals deploy one or more identities in their e-mails. In doing so, our analyses offer leverage for understanding how individual background and experiences shape claims-making.

Analyzing Individual Claims-making

Sociologists understand that although individuals have agency, they almost always operate in conditions not of their own design. This tension—the tension between macro-level structures that shape meaning-making and individual-level experiences—affects how individuals construct their claims. At the macro level, for example, news media play an important role in claims-making because they tell the public what issues are relevant (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). More central to our foci, news media also proffer frames, or interpretive constructs, that influence how individuals understand political problems, their causes, and their solutions (Iyengar and Simon 1993; Valkenburg, Semetko, and De Vreese 1999). Individuals integrate frames received via news media into their conversations (Boyle et al. 2006; Gamson 1992; Kwak et al. 2005) and, eventually, their own claims-making.

News coverage, of course, is not the only kind of content that potentially affects claims-making. Individuals are exposed to additional frames through opinion media (Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Rohlinger, Pederson, and Valle 2015), social media, and news blogs (Bichard 2006; Hamdy and Gomaa 2012; Howard and Parks 2012) as well as social movement organizations (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Rohlinger 2015). The latter, in particular, may shape individual claims-making as activist groups provide carefully crafted messages that individuals can sign and forward along to elected officials as part of larger letter-writing campaigns—campaigns that have become all the more pronounced in the digital age (Earl 2006; Earl and Kimport 2011).

Whether individuals use a frame circulating via media in their claims-making depends upon (1) the complexity of the frame, and (2) micro-level factors such as individual experience. Mainstream media highlights institutional debates that are connected to the news of the day, with some being more accessible to a lay audience than others. Frames explaining tax laws, economic declines, and medical diagnoses, for instance, may get a fair amount of media attention, yet be ignored by individuals who lack the expertise to use these complex frames in their own claims-making. Likewise, whether individuals draw on a frame in their claims-making depends upon their own background experiences. Social and familial networks, group affiliations, and personal experiences with political issues all influence how individuals understand and use frames (Duck 1991; Koopmans and Statham 1999, 2001). For example, individuals who are union members or who have union members in their
family typically reject antiunion frames they read about in news media because the interpretive constructs do not square with their lived realities (Gamson 1992).

One way to assess how individuals’ experiences and affiliations shape claims-making is to examine how and when identities are deployed. Although individuals are unlikely to signal all their affiliations and experiences in a single communication, they will amplify particular identities as “tools.” In doing so, they signal their social position relative to a political target (Benford 1993; Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010). There are at least three factors that impact such identity deployment. First, context shapes what (and how) individuals use identity in their communications. Individuals deploy (and act on) identities that are salient and relevant to a given situation (Stryker 2008). In a classroom, for instance, an individual may assume the identity of a student and behave accordingly. This is no less true of the political world, where the deployment of a particular identity may be more relevant to the issue at hand and be seen as more salient from the point of view of the political target (Bernstein 1997, 2008; Ghaziani 2011). For instance, an individual who wants her legislator to support a bill may leverage her identity as a voter or party supporter to pressure a politician to vote for its passage.

Second, identity deployment may be partly patterned by whether individuals agree or disagree with their target. Individuals leverage identities that they believe will be especially persuasive. Individuals, for example, may draw on their identities as citizens, voters, and party affiliates to subtly (or not so subtly) remind an elected official that the citizenry will ultimately determine the fate of his/her political career. Finally, the mobilization of interested actors such as social movement organizations may influence claims-making and the deployment of identity. As discussed above, activist groups routinely mobilize people and money through campaigns. Generally speaking, campaigns offer individuals a framework for understanding an issue, a readymade identity, and an easy way to get involved around an issue (e.g., signing a petition or sending an e-mail). Individuals may take advantage of social movement campaigns—as well as the frames and identities contained within—because they regard aligning themselves with a larger collective as potentially more efficacious than acting alone. Although campaigns do not prohibit individuals from offering their own spin on an issue, participating in a movement campaign means individuals present movement identities and frames alongside their own.

In sum, individual claims-making is influenced by the interaction between macro- and micro-level factors. At the macro level, news media and social movement organizations proffer frames for understanding social and political issues. These frames are consequential insofar as individuals can integrate these readymade arguments into their own logics. Some frames may be easier to use in claims-making than others. Indeed, complex frames, such as those outlining debates over medical diagnoses, are likely to be avoided by individuals who lack the expertise to use them with authority. At the micro level, individuals’ experiences and affiliations also shape claims-making. Individuals accept or reject a frame based on their affiliations, familial connections, familiarity with an issue, or whether they agree or disagree with the interpretation offered. One way to assess how micro-level factors matter is to examine whether and what identities individuals deploy in their communications. Whether (and how) individuals deploy identities, however, can vary according to the context, the extent to which they agree or disagree with their political targets, and their connection to and participation in a social movement campaign.

The Terri Schiavo Case

The Terri Schiavo case presents a compelling sociological opportunity to examine in-depth the dynamics touched on above. We specifically analyze the presence of frames and identities in 2,509 e-mails sent to Florida Governor Jeb Bush regarding Terri Schiavo. Schiavo, who collapsed in 1990 as the result of unknown causes, became a touchstone for national
debate in 2000 when a Pinellas County court granted her husband permission to withdraw her hydration and nutrition. Terri’s parents, Robert and Mary Schindler, opposed the decision and turned to the political system for recourse. With the help of conservative Christian organizations, the Schindlers took to the airwaves and successfully organized a vigil outside of Terri’s hospice. In addition, conservative Christian groups presented Bush a petition with 180,000 signatures asking him to prevent Schiavo’s death so that the Schindlers could try to get legal custody of their daughter. Their plea did not fall on deaf ears. At Jeb Bush’s urging, the Florida legislature passed “Terri’s Law,” which allowed the governor to reinstate Schiavo’s hydration and nutrition, a move later deemed unconstitutional by the Florida State Supreme Court.

In the wake of the ruling, Judge Greer set the date for the removal of Schiavo’s hydration and nutrition in March. This spurred another wave of legislative activity in Florida and on Capitol Hill. The Florida legislature considered a bill that would make removing hydration and nutrition from an individual in a persistent vegetative state illegal without a living will. The bill was narrowly defeated in the Florida Senate, 21 to 18, twice in the month of March. The U.S. Congress also got involved. On March 17, 2005, Senators Bill First and Michael Enzi subpoenaed Terri Schiavo to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. Although the Senators did not expect Schiavo to testify, the move extended witness protection to Terri and prohibited the removal of her hydration and nutrition. When Judge Greer struck down the subpoena, the U.S. Congress quickly passed “Terri’s Law II” allowing Schiavo’s case to be moved from the state to a federal court, a bill that President George W. Bush signed into law. The Schindlers immediately requested an emergency injunction in the U.S. District Court and asked for the reinstatement of Terri’s hydration and nutrition. The request was denied. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case and to grant certiorari. Schiavo passed away on March 31, 2005.

Terri Schiavo became a touchstone for national and international debate. Thousands of news stories and opinion pieces discussed her medical diagnosis (a persistent vegetative state) and staked out the positions on whether she should be kept alive or permitted to “die with dignity” (Rohlinger et al. 2015). Likewise, during 2004 and 2005, more than 250,000 e-mails were sent to Florida Governor Jeb Bush regarding the matter. These communications, which are publicly available through Florida Statute Chapter 119.01, also known as the “Sunshine Law,” are ideal for analyzing how individuals construct claims aimed at political targets because they are spontaneous and authentic political expressions, not (in) advertently prompted. In addition, e-mails are short and, consequently, it is relatively easy to assess an individual’s position on the Schiavo case and code aspects of his or her claims-making.

We constructed a stratified random sample of 1 percent of the e-mails sent to Jeb Bush in 2004 and 2005. We stratified the population by month and used a number generator to randomly sample 1 percent of the e-mails from each month. This sampling strategy has an important benefit. It ensures that we captured a broad range of claims, and allows us to examine with confidence what and how individuals deploy frames and identities across the sample. The resulting sample includes a total of 2,509 e-mails.

E-mails were coded along several indicators, including references to frames, identity, gender, geographic location, and race/ethnicity. To derive a list of frames that represented a broad range of positions individuals might include in their claims-making, the lead researcher began by analyzing the documents, press releases, and reports of 16 organizations with differing perspectives on the Schiavo case. The groups included disability rights organizations (which initially stood for Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit [ADAPT]), Advancing Independence: Modernizing Medicare and Medicaid, Disability Rights Center, and Not Dead Yet), a death with dignity organization (Compassion & Choices—formerly known as the Hemlock Society), senior organizations (American Association of Retired Persons [AARP] and Aging With Dignity), a legal organization
Rohlinger et al., (American Bar Association), medical organizations (American Medical Association and the National Hospice Foundation), a pro-life organization (National Right to Life Committee), conservative organizations (Christian Coalition, Heritage Foundation, and the Family Research Council), a religious organization (the National Catholic Partnership on Disability), and a foundation started by the Schindlers (Terrisfight.org). Drawing on this material, the lead researcher constructed a list of 42 specific arguments used to support seven general frames: the legal, medical, political, disability, religious, right to life, and death with dignity frames. Table 1 summarizes each frame and provides examples of the more specific arguments used to support or refute the general interpretation of the issue. We coded for the presence of all general frames as well as whether the individual supported Bush’s intervention on the Schiavo case. Where multiple frames are used, they were coded as such.

We also coded explicit (e.g., “as a mother” and “as a life-long Republican”) references to identity. This is important because it means we did not assume the presence of an identity based on an individual’s name or e-mail address. The coding for identity proceeded in two steps. We began by coding the presence or absence of 45 common identities belonging to five broad categories (described in Table 1): activist identities, familial identities, political identities, religious identities, and occupational identities. We included an “other” category and, after the first round of coding was complete, created two additional identity categories: the person-with-disability identity and the age-based identity. Identities were coded dichotomously so that we could ascertain whether an individual deployed more than one identity in her or his e-mail. Likewise, although we only coded explicit references to identity, we coded both direct (“I am a mother”) and indirect (“My son is in a persistent vegetative state”) references made by an individual.

The full sample was coded by a team of graduate students. To ensure intercoder reliability, a project manager checked coding consistency among team members weekly. Reliability was assessed two ways. First, the project manager randomly selected and coded at least 10 percent of the weekly coding output for each team member. The project manager would, then, assign a consistency score based on the percentage of divergent codes between project manager and individual team member’s data. Second, a subset of randomly chosen e-mails were coded by four team members simultaneously on a weekly basis. This allowed the project manager to check the reliability across coders and derive a reliability score for each coder.

\[
\text{Reliability Score} = \frac{\text{Matched Codes}}{\text{Unmatched} + \text{Matched Codes}}
\]

Team members with scores lower than 90 percent on either reliability check attended an additional training session and the e-mails were redistributed and recoded. Although this slowed down the coding process considerably, this strategy was very effective, yielding an overall reliability score of 92 percent on frames and 96 percent on identities.

The presentation of analyses proceeds in three steps. First, we provide an overview of the frames individuals use in their e-mails to Bush. Here, we use a Pearson’s chi-square analysis to determine if there are statistically significant relationships between frame usage and whether the e-mailer supported or opposed Bush’s intervention in the Schiavo case. To assess the extent to which individual claims-making reflects the ideas discussed in mass media, we compare frame deployment in e-mails to frame mentions in 1,182 media stories during the same time frame. We, then, examine whether (and what) identities individuals deploy in their claims-making. Again, we used a Pearson’s chi-square analysis to examine whether there are differences between supporters and opponents of Bush’s intervention on the Schiavo case. Finally, we show whether there are significant differences between individuals who do and do not deploy an identity in terms of their frame usage.
Table 1. Description of the Frames and Identities Coded in the Sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>General description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death With Dignity</td>
<td>Argues that Terri should be allowed to die either because it is the right choice or because Terri did not want radical life extending medical assistance. May also note that that political intervention represents the erosion of individual decision making in end-of-life choices. Individuals may mention—and disagree with—this frame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Rights</td>
<td>Purports that making health decisions on behalf of disabled individuals who cannot communicate their wishes constitutes discrimination. Individuals also use this frame to question Mr. Schiavo’s fitness as a husband and his motives. Individuals can mention—and disagree with—this frame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>Individuals who support intervention may suggest that the legal system is a problematic institution or that the judges are wrong on the Schiavo case. Individuals who oppose intervention may argue that politicians are impinging on judicial independence or that the political action violates Terri’s right to privacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Individuals supporting intervention suggest that Terri’s diagnosis is controversial and that her condition could improve with proper treatment. Opponents of intervention argue that government intervention on the Schiavo case impinges the ability of medical professionals to provide care for their patients, including those about quality of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Supporters of intervention suggest that politicians are obligated to make laws to protect the citizenry when they discover a flaw in the system. Opponents disagree, arguing that health and end of life decisions are a family (rather than a political) issue. Opponents also suggest that politicians are abusing the political process for personal and/or professional reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Suggests that society has a moral obligation to protect human life in all instances. Individuals may also note that religious doctrine teaches us to ease suffering while maintaining individual life and dignity of life. Individuals may mention—and disagree with—this frame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to Life</td>
<td>Purports that life should be protected from the “womb to tomb” and that the removal of the nutrition and hydration is a form of torture or murder. Individuals may mention—and disagree with—this argument.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identities</th>
<th>General description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age-based</td>
<td>References to one’s age (here, age 60 or older).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>References to one’s past or current activism or participation in an ongoing e-mail campaign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial</td>
<td>References family or family roles and obligations such as parent, spouse, child, relative, guardian, aunt, uncle, and grandparent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational</td>
<td>References the individual’s job or professional expertise including doctor, lawyer, professor, nurse, home care provider, and scientist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-With Disability</td>
<td>References one’s mental or physical disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>References the individual’s religious practices, beliefs, or roles such as Christian, Catholic, or Protestant. Religious occupations such as pastor, minister, and priest are also included in this category.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Claims-making in E-mails Supporting and Opposing Intervention

Table 2 shows how often each frame is used in individual claims-making and whether the e-mailer supported (1,533 e-mails) or opposed (976 e-mails) Bush’s intervention on the Schiavo case. It is clear from Table 2 that some frames are used in individual claims-making far more often than others. The political, legal, and right to life frames are mentioned most often, while death with dignity and religious frames are used the least by individuals.
Findings show that frames are generally used to stake out different positions. Individuals supporting intervention, for instance, are significantly more likely to discuss the disability, right to life, and legal frames than individuals opposing it \( (p > .001) \). Opponents of intervention, in contrast, are significantly more likely to mention the death with dignity and political frames \( (p > .001) \). Although some of the frames are clearly tailored to support a particular point of view and course of action (e.g., the death with dignity, disability, and right to life frames), this is not universally true. Political and legal frames, for instance, seem to be deployed to both support and oppose Bush’s intervention (Table 2). In this case, individuals use these frames in more particularistic ways—for example, a legal frame to support intervention and a political frame to oppose it. In short, these findings are not simply an artifact of the frames. Individuals who support intervention use different frames in their claims-making than those who do not.

Importantly, individual claims-making does not simply mirror that of mainstream media. Table 3 shows the frequency of each frame in 1,182 news stories and editorials appearing in local and regional newspapers across the country. In newspapers, the legal, medical, death with dignity, and political frames are discussed most often (mentioned in at least 51 percent of the stories), while the religious and right to life frames are discussed the least often (mentioned in less than 10 percent of the stories).

Individual use of the legal and political frames are similar to that of mass media insofar as individuals picked up on a larger political debate among Republicans and deployed it in their own claims-making. Social conservatives argued that Jeb Bush should intervene and ensure that the Schindlers received legal custody of Terri. Fiscal conservatives disagreed. They wanted Bush to quit abusing his political power and stay out of the Schiavo case (Rohlinger et al. 2015).

There are three instances in which the pattern of individual claims-makings is quite different from that of newspapers. The first is the right to life frame, which receives very little media attention. A closer analysis of the e-mails shows that the prominence of this frame is almost completely explained by a social movement campaign. In May 2004, the pro-life group Operation Rescue with the help of Randall Terry, the former Operation Rescue president who lived in Florida, organized an e-mail campaign to thank Jeb Bush for his efforts to save Terri. More than 35,000 individuals participated in the campaign, which explicitly referenced the right to life frame in the group’s proffered text. The e-mail read, “Thanks for standing up for Terri Schiavo’s right to live. And thanks for having the courage to appeal her case to a higher court. And thanks for valuing human life.” Although many participants introduced additional frames in their claims-making, the e-mail campaign is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Support intervention ( (N \text{ of e-mailers} = 1,533) )</th>
<th>Oppose intervention ( (N \text{ of e-mailers} = 976) )</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death With Dignity</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>315***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>407***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to Life</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>631***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>851****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>958****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentages do not equal 100 percent because 2 percent of the e-mails either did not mention a frame in their short e-mail (e.g., “Save Terri!”) or the frame fell into the “other” category. Because the e-mails in the “other” category could not be meaningfully organized, they are excluded here.

\*\( p > .05 \). \**\( p > .01 \). \***\( p > .001 \) (two-tailed test).
responsible for the predominance of the right to life frame in the email sample.

Second, individuals rarely included the death with dignity frame in their emails; a frame that appeared in 57 percent of the news stories. One explanation for the limited discussion of this frame by individuals is the absence of organizations (or individuals) visibly championing the idea in broader culture. As seen above, the presence of an interested actor with a clear message and goal can shape the content of individual claims-making—at least in the short term. We did find support for this interpretation. We noticed that Compassion & Choices, which specifically advocates that individuals with terminal illness should be allowed to die with dignity, did not publish or put out an official statement on the Schiavo case. This was surprising given the prominence of such an argument in media accounts. We contacted the group for an explanation and learned that the organization decided that the Schiavo case was "too controversial" as Terri’s end-of-life wishes were unclear. The spokesperson explained that the group focused on the importance of individuals’ communicating their end-of-life wishes for their loved ones. In short, Compassion & Choices distanced itself from the death with dignity frame and urged individuals to engage in personal—rather than collective—action, which reduced the utility of the frame in individual claims-making around the Schiavo case. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to Compassion & Choices’ recent campaign with Brittany Maynard, in which the organization actively pushed for legislation allowing individuals to die with dignity.

To further explore the relevance of organized actors, we identified 19 organizations that had issued at least one press release on the case. We then searched each organization’s Web site as well as mainstream news coverage (using LexisNexis) and the Web (using Google) for information regarding campaigns, protests, and other actions and statements in which each group engaged. This analysis revealed that groups championing religious and disability frames—neither of which were discussed often in emails or media coverage—focused their efforts on litigation/lobbying and direct action, respectively. For example, the religious-based organization Concerned Women for America issued two press releases outlining its lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C., but made no effort to get average citizens involved in a larger campaign or to circulate its ideas about the case broadly. Similarly, activists from disability rights groups such as Not Dead Yet joined the pro-life vigil outside of Terri’s hospice and even chained themselves to the doors of the building but did not connect these actions to a larger organized effort or publicize them beyond its Web site. In short, although religious and disability rights organizations were active around the case, they did not make any efforts to garner wider public support or involvement. It is, perhaps, thus not a surprise that their framing is scarcely represented in individual appeals to Bush.

Finally, although the medical frame was mentioned in 70 percent of the media stories,

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**Table 3. Frequency of Frames Mentioned in Mainstream Newspapers.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Percent of mentions in the sample</th>
<th>No. of mentions in the sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death With Dignity</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to Life</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of Frames</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of Stories</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Percentages do not equal 100 percent because, typically, more than one frame was discussed in the media story. The percentages reflect the frequency of each frame in the total number of media stories.*
only 13 percent of individuals discussed it in their e-mails. Not surprisingly, mainstream media professionals, who rely on institutional sources for the news of the day (Tuchman 1972), looked to medical experts to assess Schiavo’s diagnosis and prognosis; both of which were controversial. Individuals without medical expertise likely found these debates difficult to follow and avoided medical arguments when it came to their own claims-making. Complex frames that require a specific skill set to leverage effectively, in other words, get media attention but are discussed by individuals at relatively low rates.

Table 4 reports the frequency with which individuals did (45.2 percent) and did not (54.8 percent) deploy an identity in their e-mail. We also report rates of support and opposition to Jeb Bush’s intervention in the Schiavo case, or the extent to which an individual’s position is unclear. In these latter instances, the individual mentioned Terri Schiavo in the context of their own medical problems for which they were seeking Bush’s assistance. Although the percentage of individuals deploying an identity in their e-mails varies, the distribution of support and opposition to intervention by those who did and did not deploy an identity is nearly identical. At first glance, this suggests that identities are important for motivating some individuals to contact Bush, but that identity deployment cannot be explained by an individual’s position on the Schiavo case alone.

Table 4. Distribution of E-mails Sent to Bush Supporting and Opposing Intervention by Identity Deployment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance on Schiavo Case</th>
<th>Identity deployed</th>
<th>Identity not deployed</th>
<th>Percent of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support Intervention</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>1,532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose Intervention</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear Position</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>1,135</td>
<td>1,374</td>
<td>2,509</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aThe sum of column does not equal 100 percent as a result of rounding.

The statistical pattern is not clear with the legal frame. In fact, individuals here draw on a range of identities (e.g., identities as citizens, Christians, women) in conjunction with the legal frame. For example, Harold drew on his identity as a “concerned American” (political identity) to ask Bush to do more on Terri’s behalf:

As a concerned American, I kindly urge you to redouble your efforts to save Terri Schiavo and protect her from forced starvation. It is extremely important to safeguard Terri’s right to life. Further, we cannot afford to set a legal precedent which puts the lives of other Americans at risk. I applaud and support . . . [any] effort that will stop the forced starvation of Terri Schiavo.
Katherine, however, used a religious identity to ask Bush to provide Schiavo with more legal protection:

> Mr. Bush, as a Christian woman, as concerned as I am for my sister in Christ’s, Ms. Shiavo’s, life, I am also as concerned for your soul as my brother in Christ. If you have any power, now is your test. Yes, from a distance, I see the concern and caring that you have. You seem to be a good man, Mr. Bush. But, you are teetering, it seems, with regard to Terri’s life. An endangered fly or onion seems to have more protection under the law.

> If we focus on supporters of intervention alone, the findings suggest that there is not a clear pattern between the identity deployment of intervention supporters and the use of rights discourse outside of social movement campaigns.

Table 5, however, indicates that the relationship between frame and identity deployment is strategic, particularly when individuals disagree with their political target. Opponents of intervention who deploy an identity in their claims-making are significantly more likely to discuss a political frame in their e-mails than individuals who do not deploy an identity ($p > .05$). Table 6 also shows that individuals opposing intervention are significantly more likely to deploy a political identity in their e-mails. A closer analysis of political identity reveals that more than 75 percent of individuals opposing intervention identify as fellow Republicans; the party with which Bush is affiliated (analyses not shown). In other words, some individuals strategically use an identity they share with their target to argue against a particular course of action.
For instance, Don used his political identity to accuse Bush of abusing his power,

As a life-long Republican I have never voted for a Democrat but because of your actions in the Terri Schiavo affair, there is no way that I would vote for you again. I feel that you had no business in pushing a law through based on your personal feelings. I thought that the Governor represented the people, not his own feelings and conviction.

Similarly, Barbara argued,

As a 100 percent Republican throughout my 67 years, I’m absolutely appalled that you and your brother are so openly political in this live or die case. You are going to make the Bush Family the laughing stock of these United States if you step further into the Schiavo case.

In a joint e-mail, Leigh and Joseph agreed:

We are 60 years of age and are lifelong Republicans. We voted for your Dad twice for President, voted for your brother twice for President, and voted twice for you for Governor. We live in Palm Harbor, FL, and have closely followed the Schiavo case through its many court hearings here in nearby Clearwater. This matter has been litigated for many years before the Florida Circuit and Appeals Courts and the Federal District and Appeals Courts. We view your involvement now in this case as the sickest form of political opportunism; likewise the involvement of your brother and other Republicans in the Congress.

Because Jeb Bush is part of a larger political family and, at the time, there were public discussions about his political career beyond the Florida governorship, opponents of intervention used their political identities to buttress their claims.

Jeb Bush’s political links as well as the discussion regarding whether (and when) he would throw his hat into the political ring as a presidential candidate also explains why individuals used an age-based identity significantly more often to oppose intervention (Table 6). As senior citizens vote at relatively high rates, politicians often make pitches to this demographic directly (Binstock 2000). Given talk of another Bush in the White House, some seniors likely viewed their age (and their propensity to vote) as a strategic tool in their claims-making. In short, individuals deployed identities in their claims-making that they believed gave them some leverage over Bush’s future decision making.

As individual experience shapes political engagement and claims-making, not all identities are used in such a clear-cut fashion. Table 6 indicates that there are not statistically significant differences in how supporters and opponents of intervention deployed familial, occupational, religious, or person-with-disability identities in their e-mails. For example, individuals drew on their familial roles as mothers, daughters, fathers, and sons to urge Bush to act or stay out of the Schiavo case. Melinda, who deployed a familial identity, pleaded for Bush to intervene, “As a mother of four boys, I can only imagine what Terri’s parents must be going through. PLEASE save the life of this woman from a man who obviously [sic] does not care about her.” Christina, in contrast, used her familial identity to advocate against intervention,

I am a mother of a child who died in 2001. I know how it feels to lose a child and it is devastating. However, this case is about a brain dead WOMEN [sic] not a child. I feel you and your cohorts are devoting way to [sic] much time and energy on this ONE case.

We found similar trends with the other identities. Individuals, for instance, used their medical expertise (occupational identities) to urge Bush to intervene and stay out of the Schiavo case as well as religious identities to suggest that Bush was being tested to see “if his mind and soul are right with the Lord” and argue that his actions (intervention or lack thereof) would affect his place in “God’s kingdom.”

Discussion
This article uses unique data to explore individual claims-making processes with politics surrounding Terri Schiavo as a compelling sociological case in point. Analyzing e-mails
sent to Jeb Bush and media coverage on the Schiavo case allowed us to assess how macro- and micro-level factors interact and shape personal communication. Our results show that, although the frames circulating via news media are used in individuals’ claims-making, there at least three things that influence the prominence and use of these frames in personal e-mails. First, whether an individual supports or opposes the position of a political target shapes the frames they tend to deploy. This is, in fact, true regardless of whether or not a frame suggests a particular course of action.

The death with dignity, disability, and right to life frames all provide a specific rationale for either supporting or opposing intervention. The legal and political frames, however, do not. Individuals were significantly more likely to use a legal frame to support intervention and a political frame to oppose it.

Second, social movement campaigns can dramatically influence what ideas (and identities) are included in individual claims. Operation Rescue flooded Bush’s mailbox with thank you e-mails in May 2004. Although many individuals elaborated on the group’s pithy correspondence by inserting their thoughts on the Schiavo case, the first frame (right to life) and identity (activist) Bush saw was that crafted by Operation Rescue. Likewise, our analysis of Compassion & Choices (a death with dignity group), Concerned Women for America (a religious group), and Not Dead Yet (a disability rights group) show that failing to mobilize the citizenry (or avoiding the debate) affects the frequency with which their ideas appear in individual claims.

Third, the complexity of a frame can affect whether or not individuals ultimately refer to it. Frames that get picked up by media outlets sometimes are too specialized or complicated for inclusion in most individual claims-making. The medical frame is a good example in this regard. It makes sense that individuals who were unfamiliar with the nuances of Schiavo’s persistent vegetative state diagnosis and the likelihood of her recovery avoided the medical frame altogether.

Our findings also highlight the ways in which macro- and micro-level factors interact and shape how identities are deployed in individual claims-making. Some individuals deployed identities that they believed gave them leverage with their political target, Jeb Bush. For example, individuals opposing intervention used their political identities—primarily as Republicans—to urge Bush to dedicate his political energy elsewhere. Other individuals, in contrast, deployed the readymade activist identity offered as part of a larger social movement campaign. The lesson here is that identity deployment is not always clear-cut at the individual level. Individuals draw on identities that are salient to them, given the context and their personal experiences (Stryker 1980). This explains why e-mailers used familial, occupational, and religious identities to both support and oppose Bush’s actions on the Schiavo case.

Conclusion

Although some aspects of our findings may be specific to the case of Terri Schiavo, we believe that several key dimensions of our argument and findings are more general in nature and can thus be extended to other cases and contexts. Some frames and identities are veritable staples in debates, and, consequently, individuals supporting or opposing everything from environmental justice to gay rights use familial and religious identities in their claims-making. Likewise, it is reasonable to expect that individuals use political frames and identities when they are trying to exert influence over a politician’s position or actions, particularly as these will be the most powerful rhetorical tools at their disposal. For example, individuals flooded Florida Governor Rick Scott’s e-mail and phone lines after Treyvon Martin’s death with threats to vote him out if he upheld—and refused to address—the controversial Stand Your Ground Law, which permits individuals to use deadly force against those they regard as threats to their safety.

We see at least three general contributions to sociological understandings of individual-level claims-making in this article. First, we highlight the importance of claims-makers to individual claims-making. Scholars typically focus on the indirect effects of claims-makers
via media channels (Best 1987; Gusfield 1981; McCombs and Shaw 1972). However, we show that organized actors can have an immediate influence on individual interpretations and claims-making—at least in the short term—if they make a concerted effort to do so. The “Thank you Jeb Bush” campaign is a good example in this regard. The May 2004 campaign was launched while lawyers debated the constitutionality of “Terri’s Law” in the Florida court. Yet, thousands of individuals participated in the campaign and e-mailed Jeb Bush during this period of relative legislative inactivity. While it is difficult to say whether this campaign affected Bush’s decision making, the results suggest that e-mail campaigns may be an effective way to garner leverage over a political target. It is, after all, very difficult for elected officials to ignore thousands of e-mails urging them to support (or oppose) a particular course of action. In contrast, claims-makers that urge personal rather than collective action, or do not mobilize the citizenry at all, are likely to find that their ideas are not picked up by individuals when they craft their claims.

Our findings hold methodological implications as well. The influence of claims-makers suggests that social scientists must carefully devise sampling strategies when it comes to “big data,” particularly if they are interested in understanding individual-level behavior. Had we not been deliberate in our sampling of the more than 250,000 e-mails, the importance of claims-makers such as Operation Rescue on individual claims-making could have been missed. Likewise, we would not have been able to explain the relative absence of claims reflecting other organized interests such as the Compassion & Choices on the Schiavo case. Capturing changes in a political context over time, in other words, is critical to accurate analyses of individual action in the digital age.

Second, and related, this article and our analyses indicate that scholars should be careful when trying to link media frames with individual claims-making. As discussed above, there are other influences on individual claims-making (e.g., social movement campaigns) and factors that may cause individuals to shy away from particular kinds of claims. Frames that reference institutional debates, for instance, get a lot of media attention as news outlets work to educate an audience but are often avoided by individuals, who may lack the expertise or confidence to digest the particularistic or expert-centered knowledge that is communicated. Individuals may take cues from mainstream news media, but how they integrate frames into their own claims-making does not reflect coverage alone.

Finally, our analyses highlight the utility and promise of using electronic data to study individual-level claims-making. Social scientists increasingly use discussion boards and forums to understand framing processes and collective identity formation in the digital world (Caren, Gaby, and Bond 2012; Carroll and Hackett 2006; Chopra 2006; Futrell and Simi 2004; Hughey 2008; Wall 2007). E-mail offers an individual-level equivalent and, when used appropriately, offers scholars the opportunity to delve deeper into the understanding of individual identity, claims-making, and political action. Although the availability of such data often varies in character and quality, finding and understanding their utility is arguably all the more important in the contemporary era. This is particularly true if scholars are interested in analyzing individual behavior relative to a target. In short, absent ways to systematically analyze individual political behavior, sociologists are unlikely to understand the factors that influence it in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

1. The average word count for an e-mail was 153.32.
2. Although politicians are required to make all of their documents public, we could not find e-mails for years other than 2004 and 2005. Although it is possible that no e-mails were sent prior to 2004, this seemed unlikely given the controversy of the case. We spoke to the lead archivist several times regarding this issue, but she was unable to find any additional records (e-mails or letters to the governor).
3. There are five months in which no e-mails were sent. Two of these months occurred before Terri’s death (April 2004, June 2004), and three were after Terri’s death (June 2005, August 2005, November 2005).
4. Individuals rarely provided demographics such as gender and race or geographic information in their e-mails. Thus, these variables are not reported here.
5. Some groups did not have anything posted on their Web sites, and, therefore, their ideas could not be analyzed systematically. For example, many pundits discussed how the Schiavo case posed a challenge to the Republican Party by pitting social conservatives against fiscal conservatives. The Republican National Committee issued no formal statements nor did it take a formal position on the case.
6. One might argue that individuals may be deceptive in their identity deployment. Although this is an interesting point that scholars have discussed in detail (see, for example, Birke 2000; Herring 2008; MacCallum-Stewart 2008), this does not undermine our purpose, which is to understand what and how identity is used (rather than the validity of a given individual’s identity deployment).
7. Although this identity was in the initial codebook, we left it “open” so that we could accurately reference how these identities were deployed in the e-mails.
8. All but two of the individuals noted their age was at least 60 years old. These two cases were dropped from the analysis. We also dropped eight other cases from the sample, where individuals identified themselves as “human beings” or based on their geographic location (e.g., “Florida residents”).
9. In cases where the expected value within the contingency tables was less than 5, we cross-checked the analysis using Fisher’s Exact test. There was only a discrepancy in critical values of the two tests in one instance. We report the more conservative result.
10. All stories were obtained via LexisNexis and coded for the presence of each frame. The same technique (and coders) were used to content analyze media coverage. For a detailed discussion of the newspaper sample, see Rohlinger, Pederson, and Valle (2015).
12. To verify this assertion, we also conducted time-sensitive analyses (not shown) and found that the activist identity was almost exclusively used in conjunction with the e-mail campaign.

References


