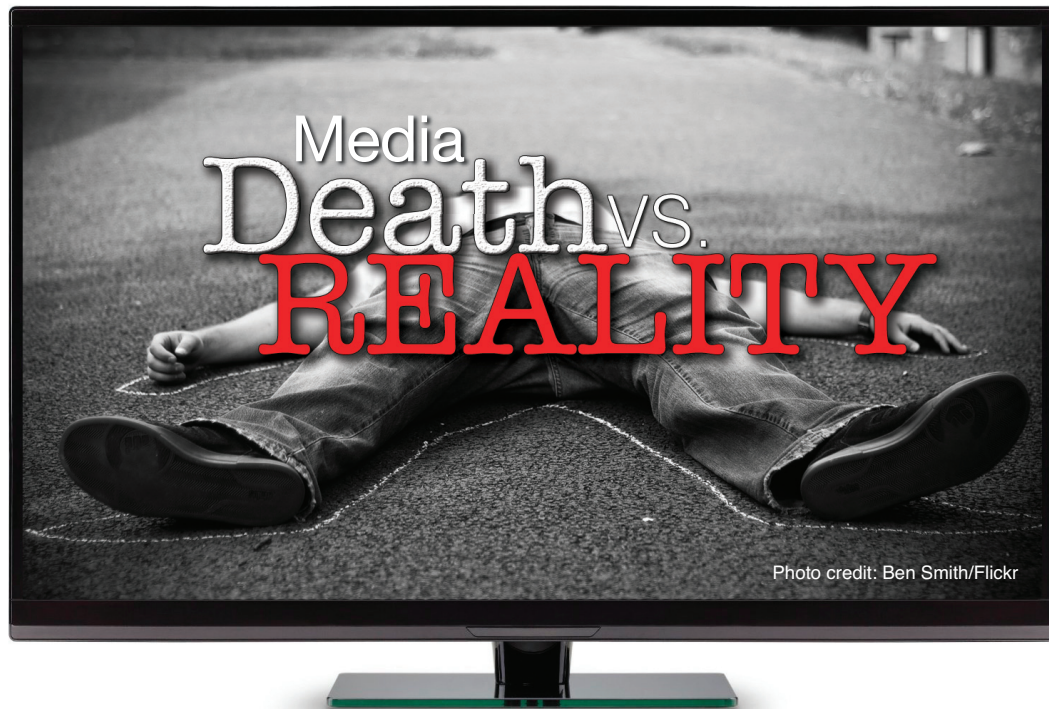


# Analysis

By Lisa Howard-Fusco



## How it Impacts Funeral Service

Anyone who has been exposed to a television police drama, a news update on CNN or an action film is aware of how often the media portray death. In a 1992 study titled, “Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society,” it was reported that by the time a person is 18 years of age, he or she will have already witnessed 40,000 “murders.” Yet how many people can claim that they had recently seen a media depiction of a funeral service?

“There’s lots of death in TV shows but very few funerals,” said Gail Rubin, speaker/consultant, and owner of the website “A Good Goodbye,” who is also known as The Doyenne of Death. ® “For instance, when I binge-watched ‘Breaking Bad,’ out of the many deaths in that show, there were only two funerals referenced – and they weren’t even shown.”

In its 2012 “TV Body Count Study,” funeralwise.com (a website that helps people to navigate planning funerals, educate them on their value and connect them with funeral homes) confirmed that while there are many deaths portrayed on television – in some cases up to 25 dead bodies in a single episode, such as in the Starz series “Spartacus: Vengeance” – there are precious few funerals depicted.

“Death is portrayed but not funeral service,” said Rick Pasquin, co-founder of funeralwise.com, who created the site to combat the ignorance about what should happen after a death occurs. “If you see a funeral on TV, there’s usually someone giving a eulogy, but there’s no funeral director in sight. I don’t think the media does much to portray actual funeral service, and it doesn’t do the industry any favors.”

Even when the mission is to document or report actual events, such as in newspapers or television news, the media do not seem to do much better in the portrayal of death. As summed up in the crude adage “If it bleeds, it leads,” violent crimes usually run first on the front page or on local newscasts; again, funerals don’t get as much coverage, said Rubin. Part of that reason, she said, may be sensitivity toward the family, as they may assume that most families don’t want press coverage at their loved ones’ funerals; yet when reporting on the scene of a tragic death, most news reporters or show hosts focus on the question, “How do you feel?” looking to prompt emotional replies.

“It’s not healthy,” Rubin explained. “I think it makes people want to avoid any consideration of end-of-life issues, so they can minimize the stress associated with loss. Unfortunately, avoiding discussing funeral plans before someone dies only makes it worse when death occurs and the family is unprepared.”

Some however, see the news media’s coverage of death and funeral service as negatively interfering with the relationship between funeral directors and the public.

“Newtown (the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings) was covered in depth by the media, and even the funerals were covered; but the funeral homes were not,” said Vernie Fountain, founder of the Fountain National Academy of Professional Embalming in Springfield, Missouri. “The funeral directors did so many things free of charge for those families, but it wasn’t talked about much. Maybe it’s because it’s a positive thing, and it wouldn’t sell as well. But they often cover things in funeral service that go wrong, and as a result, funeral directors are made out by the public to be crooks in general.”

Recently, a few of TV’s “reality

shows” have begun taking on funeral service as their very subject, as demonstrated in such programs as “Best Funeral Ever” or “Wrestling with Death;” but according to many funeral industry professionals, they also miss the mark.

“I love the service creativity ‘Best Funeral Ever’ demonstrates, but the manufactured drama is pointless,” Rubin said. “These ‘reality shows’ might show funerals, but they reach out for drama, not everyday service. After all, what ordinary weeping family wants a camera in their face? In real life, when I go out as a celebrant to plan, it’s not dramatic – it’s nice. It’s healing and cathartic, but I suppose it makes boring TV.”

The exception to this rule, however, seems to be the show “Six Feet Under,” which ran for five seasons on HBO and ended in 2005. Many funeral professionals still point to it as one of the extremely rare examples of (mostly) accurate depictions of funerals and funeral service.

“The only time I’ve seen them get it right was when ‘Six Feet Under’ first came out,” said Todd Van Beck, a veteran funeral director, educator and consultant. “Based on what they were showing, I found that they had to be talking to someone who knew about death and the funeral industry; nobody in Hollywood could have made it up. It really had the raw data of life; it wasn’t candycoated.”

What most death-care experts pointed to was the fact that while every episode opened with a death, it was often followed by the family going through the planning process with a funeral director, something that is almost nonexistent in the media.

“It illuminated the whole



**Gail Rubin, Speaker/Consultant**

process,” explained Rubin. “It would show that funeral directors are humans with emotions.”

However, she notes, there were times that the show did get a few things wrong. In one episode that featured a Jewish funeral, she said, the context of the show seemed to be inferring that it was being held on a Saturday. “A Jewish funeral would never be held on a Saturday,” she said.

Other death-care professionals, however, still saw the show as an inaccurate portrayal of themselves and their mission, and in the same category as other attempts to portray funeral service. “I don’t agree with these shows that portray us and our profession,” Fountain said. “Shows like ‘Six Feet Under’ or ‘Family Plots’ or ‘Wrestling With Death’ all show a twisted version of us. We don’t all fuss and fight like that, and we are not all standing over the body, wringing our hands and being weird. I don’t think the media portray the kind of general commitment that the funeral profession has.”

Another discrepancy that seems to be prevalent in the media is that, despite the rising cremation rate, when a funeral is shown, it is often still a traditional casket, service and burial.

“Even with an increased cremation rate, most of the funerals I see on TV harken back to earlier times,” Rubin said. “On recent shows like





**Todd Van Beck, veteran funeral director & educator**

‘Hot in Cleveland’ and ‘The New Girl,’ I’ve seen funerals with a body in a casket. Funeral directors would love to be living the life still portrayed in TV shows.”

Rubin also mentions that once, when she saw news coverage of a funeral for a local firefighter that was cremated, she found it “jarring to see all the pomp and circumstance around his remains in an urn,” and that perhaps, in symbolic terms that an urn doesn’t “say ‘funeral’ as much as a casket does.”

If a cremation service is shown on TV, it is often the highly creative ones, and never direct cremation, Van Beck added. “It’s interesting that from that aspect the media seem to be more thorough than with casketed burials,” he said.

But how does the media’s prevalent disconnect with the reality of death and funeral service affect the relationship of the death-care industry and the families it serves?

Van Beck said that he has seen people become more disconnected surrounding death in general, with an inability to handle it effectively when they are inevitably confronted with it.

“My main bone of contention is that the media create insignificant death, characters whose deaths don’t

mean anything to anybody,” said Van Beck. “When you see people dying every night on the TV screen and there are no consequences, people can scoff and laugh at it, and it becomes a coping mechanism. There’s times when the grief and pain of a death is portrayed eloquently, but I often notice that they don’t project the funeral as part of the healing process. I think they’re playing a kid’s game

with it, and we’re creating a generation of death-illiterate people.”

As a result, Rubin added, fewer people have “mortality salience,” the ability of a person to accept that he or she is going to die at some point, and be willing to create a legacy. Most people are terrified by the idea of not being, she said, so they will use their intellect to construct ways of achieving “immortality” through creating a legacy – such as by writing books, having children, establishing institutions, etc. How well this acceptance is integrated into a person’s life usually determines as to whether or not someone will plan ahead for his or her death.

“What people see on TV doesn’t encourage them to preplan at all,” Rubin said. “You don’t ever see any character preplan their funeral and say ‘we’re happy now, and less stressed.’”

This lack of planning also leads to a type of sticker shock

when they are faced with making funeral arrangements for a loved one, and may lead them to take what to them seems the easier and cheapest way out: direct cremation.

“I think when someone goes to a funeral home and sees that there is a big price difference for burial versus cremation, that’s the time to talk to families about the value of some kind of a service,” Rubin said. “But if they haven’t planned or saved for it, they see the price and they say ‘holy cow, look at how much this costs, what can we do?’ They want to get out of it as quickly as possible. So what they see on TV is that they’re supposed to have a funeral, but when they open their wallets, they say ‘it’s not going to happen.’”

There is also a general public mistrust of funeral directors, much of it driven by the media’s heavy coverage of the scandals in the funeral industry, in which families may be reluctant to take a funeral director’s advice because they are convinced that he or she is just looking to make money off of their pain and vulnerability.

“In the news, it’s always about problems or scandals in funeral service, and only the bad gets portrayed,” said Pasquin, who co-founded [funeralwise.com](http://funeralwise.com) in order to

**Rick Pasquin, co-founder of FuneralWise.com**





**Vernie Fountain, founder, Fountain National Academy of Professional Embalming**

“get people to come to grips with death denial in our society” and eliminate this stereotype of funeral directors. “You’d always like the media to be more real, and not sensational.”

Ideally, many death-care professionals would love to see the media open up the conversation around death and funeral service and incorporate it into daily life, rather than treating it as something gloomy, separate and taboo. Rubin said she

great to get on a morning talk show and discuss it.”

However, Pasquin cautioned that it is not the media’s responsibility to change things. “I think what needs to change more than the media is the funeral profession itself,” he said. “If you want to change people’s attitudes, the industry needs to take charge and focus more on planning and on celebration of life. The industry could do more. They need to do things through PR and

would like to see the media treat funerals like “the life cycle event that they are,” perhaps giving them the same treatment as planning a wedding.

“It’s a lot like a wedding in many ways, but you don’t see the same amount of planning and creativity going into a memorial service,” she said. “You’ll see wedding specials on TV, but you won’t see funeral specials. I think it would be

community outreach, things that people can see, that would humanize the profession to them. I think the industry is moving in that direction, but it is not so good at reaching out to the consumer to let them know about it.”

Fountain agreed, and said that he thinks the industry might do better by reaching out to the media directly. “There’s a disconnect,” he said. “The media do not understand funeral service. When we speak about this issue at our state conventions, we’re only preaching to the choir. We have to get the message out to the public. I’ve always been an advocate of doing things on an organized, national level, perhaps a website for the public called, ‘Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Funeral Service but Were Afraid to Ask’ or some sort of organized social media that would connect the public, such as ‘Questions for the Experts.’”

Ironically, Rubin has had some success in using media, such as films, to help funeral homes change the conversation around death and preplanning. Ultimately, she said, she finds that humor is the best way to reduce the public’s fear, relax them and help them learn what they need to know. She often helps funeral homes set up movie nights (she has an umbrella license to present films in public) with films like “Death at a Funeral,” “Elizabethtown,” and “Get Low.” She finds that it gets people laughing and learning, and provides warm leads for the funeral home. “I think it would be beneficial for funeral directors to present themselves as the party planners for the party no one wants to have, because that is what they are,” Rubin said.

Overall, Pasquin said, it is up to those in the funeral industry to contribute to how they want to be seen in the media and in the eyes of the public, and funeral providers need to provide that information to people. “I think too many in the industry are stuck in the old ways ... but the world has moved on,” he pointed out. •

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