Abortion Groups in the Press:
An Analysis of Four National Newspapers

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by Marilyn A. Mote-Yale
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Introduction

battle over abortion during the twenty year period following the Supreme Court's 1973
*Roe v Wade* decision.

Abortion and the Press

When scholars study the interaction between politics and the media, the focus is
often on the type of coverage given to electoral campaigns, or the ability of the media to
set the agenda of governmental officials and the public. The accepted view of the
interaction between politics (whether it be political officials, campaigns, or issues), the
public, and the media, is that the mass media serve “as the primary channels of political
communication,”¹ “link[ing] leaders to the general public . . . and help[ing to] set issues
and events on the agenda of public discussion.”² This agenda setting hypothesis asserts
that “increased salience of a topic or issue in the mass media influences the salience of
that topic or issue among the public.”³ Thus researchers in the field of political science,
and communications, analyze the frequency, placement, length, and language of media
stories dealing with issues (such as crime), and political campaigns.⁴

¹ Elder and Cobb 1983, 9.
² Nimmo 1978, 29.
and Kinder 1990.
⁴ As far as political campaigns are concerned, both sets of scholars look for the style of coverage that
dominates campaigns as well as any indication that the coverage is biased. (See Patterson 1980 and
1985, Patterson and David 1985, and King 1990.) Frequency studies often focus on whether the
frequency of stories regarding crime, for example, reflect real trends in the crime rate. (See Graber
issues are studied, the question is often: does increased coverage lead to increased public concern? When the media coverage given to electoral campaigns is studied the question becomes: is the media’s focus issues or “horse race,” and, is the coverage fair or biased? But whether the conclusion of these studies is that the media create issues (or “spectacles”), or merely reflect the concerns of elites, the power of the media as, at minimum, a vehicle to a larger public is clear throughout.

With the importance of this vehicle in mind, this paper can turn to the issue of abortion. Abortion is an issue whose press coverage is meaningful. The amount and type of coverage given to abortion can influence the salience of the issue for the public, and thus lawmakers, leading to real policy consequences.

One study that acknowledges this “power of the media,” and the willingness of reporters and editors to use it with respect to abortion is Olasky’s *Abortion in the Press* (1988). This extensive description of abortion in newspapers emphasized not only the power of the press, but also the failing of reporters and editors to be objective on this issue. The press coverage of abortion during the period of study (1838-1988) was found to be unbalanced and biased against the anti-abortion viewpoint. According to Olasky, “abortionists” were often portrayed as “saints who had undergone persecution but had persevered for humanitarian reasons.”

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failing shows that abortionists were given opportunities to frame themselves in a positive light whereas anti-abortionists were not. “Following the Supreme Court’s Roe ruling, The Cleveland Press quoted local abortionist Robert H. Schwartz as saying, ‘I enjoy helping people and therefore I enjoy doing abortions.’” The coverage given this issue allowed abortion supporters to dominate the debate and single-handedly define the issue. Olasky evidences his outrage at this bias by equating the coverage with a gift: “before the Court’s decision [abortionists, including one particular abortion clinic owner,] ‘Madame Restell had to pay for [their] advertising, but [following Roe] newspapers helped abortionists for free and refurbished their images.’” As further evidence of pro-abortion bias in this case, the author points out that “Anti-abortionists were not quoted,” and thus had no opportunity to explain or define themselves, the issue, or the Court’s decision as they interpreted it. The reader was left with the impression that the Court’s decision was helpful to charitable physicians such as Dr. Schwartz. Olasky’s conclusion following this and similar stories is that the press have routinely, for well over 100 years, promoted the “propaganda of pro-abortionists.”

While Olasky’s report focused on press coverage of this issue, it did not seek to systematically investigate the coverage given to abortion, or the groups involved, by particular newspapers. There have been case studies of pro and anti abortion groups, however, that have referenced the efforts of these activists to involve the press in their

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7 Olasky 1988, 120.
8 Olasky 1988, 120.
9 Olasky 1988, 120.
campaigns. As reported in Hershey's 1986 study of the political participation of these single-issue groups, members of the pro-life movement have engaged in direct-action tactics aimed at abortion service providers, and their workers and clients, in order to generate press coverage. Staggenborg's study of the pro-choice movement discusses a similar strategy by group supporters:

the mass media were frequently used to gain direct access to constituents, a strategy that encouraged dramatic presentations of confrontational demands. NARAL and other organizations used the mass media to gain support for the repeal cause because they felt limited by established organizational channels. NARAL held several demonstrations and press conferences at which controversial announcements often were made in order to create publicity for the organization and win new advantages in the fight for appeal. On many occasions, NARAL successfully combined the public relations know-how of its leaders with the willingness of feminists to participate in confrontational or theatrical kinds of activities.

NARAL and local organizations also spent a good deal of time debating the opposition, in part because this was a way to get media attention. NARAL speakers debated right-to-life opponents on local television and radio shows across the country. NARAL was able to attract a good deal of media attention as a result of both the controversial nature of its position and the public relations skills of NARAL leaders.

Method

To investigate the amount and kind of coverage devoted to these groups, this study relied on data extracted from four major newspapers: The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post. These papers

11 Staggenborg, 43-44.
were chosen for several reasons: they are national newspapers and thus have a readership throughout the country, stories in these papers influence thinking and dialogue about this issue, as a result of this and because small newspapers at times reprint stories that first appear in larger dailies, or follow the lead of these larger dailies.

A review of the 6718 index entries under the heading "abortion" in the four newspapers chosen revealed a set of 2519 entries referencing groups (694 group referencing entries appeared in The Los Angeles Times, 728 appeared in The New York Times, 608 appeared in The Washington Post, and 489 appeared in the The Wall Street Journal). From this set, individual news stories were randomly chosen to be part of this study. In all, 286 articles comprise the data set. Each story was coded as to length, story placement, amount of coverage, subject matter, and affective message. The subject matter categories were: demonstrations/protests/rallies/marches, campaign

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12 Only news stories focusing on activity in this country were chosen for selection in this study. Editorials, Feature Articles, Letters to the Editor, corrections, and photographs and illustrations were excluded.

13 Articles were said to reference abortion groups if a particular group was mentioned in the index entry, or if key words (such as pro-lifers, advocates, demonstrators, etc.) indicated that the article focused on groups. Index entries that referenced clergy, or a particular church were not included as abortion-group referencing entries. The Wall Street Journal's low number reflects the fact that "abortion" was not an index heading prior to 1977, thus no articles were included in this study from that newspaper prior to 1977.

14 Every 8th story from The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and the Washington Post referencing groups was chosen for inclusion while every 4th story from The Wall Street Journal was chosen. While choosing every 8th story provided a manageable number of stories in the first three papers, this method was not adequate for The Wall Street Journal because the total number of articles dealing with this issue was so much less.

15 No distinction was made between these because the terms are often used interchangeably by reporters. Thus a prayer rally, which might be intended by the sponsors to accentuate a positive message, was combined under this heading with a demonstration intended to protest President Carter's stand on abortion for example, which might have involved more confrontation style coverage.
activity, lobbying activity, press conference/statement, meeting/convention, lawsuit, analysis by reporter, and other.\textsuperscript{16} The affective message coding followed the approach used by van Driel and Richardson, and Crouch and Damphousse. Each news story was rated as "negative," "neutral," "negative to opposition," or "positive." If the words or perspective of the story left the reader with the impression that the group or reported activity was wrong or bad, it was coded as negative. If the story appeared to take no side, it was coded as neutral. If the article directly or indirectly criticized the group in question, it was coded as "negative to opposition." Finally, if the article clearly supported the group or activity, it was coded as positive.

Findings

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, groups receive consistent increased attention in all four newspapers beginning, most noticeably, in 1984. Articles still focused on governmental actors (the congress and its appropriations bills received attention, as did the Court and its roughly 15 Supreme Court rulings delivered during this time period, the president - including appointment selections and election concerns, and the states), but steady attention was also given to groups involved in this debate. For example, a \textit{Washington Post} article focused primarily on the Supreme Court, and its likely decision in an abortion case, devoted four paragraphs out of twenty to the anticipated reaction of

\textsuperscript{16} The "other" category included such stories as profiles of individual group leaders and calls for boycotting of particular companies.
supporters and opposers of abortion. So while abortion groups were not always the sole focus of this attention, they were recognized as potentially influential players, and therefore newsworthy.

As Table 1 indicates, articles in all four newspapers consistently referenced the very public, and dramatic, activity of demonstrating more often than any other topic. Demonstrating can refer to tens of thousands rallying outside the Capitol, (which routinely occurs on the anniversary of the Roe decision), hundreds protesting a presidential appointment, or dozens blocking the entrance to a clinic. As mentioned above, whether involving large numbers or small, these actions are most often dramatic affairs filled with emotion; they therefore make good copy. A few examples tell the story: In January of 1974, for example, a small group of pro-choicers marched, “some chained to symbolize Senator [James] Buckley’s [the sponsor of a constitutional amendment to overturn Roe] attempts to enslave women by unwanted childbirth.” A 1976 New York Times article references a much larger protest at which a common visual occurred: “Four young boys and an adult marched in the crowd along Pennsylvania Avenue beating drums and behind them were two donkeys leading a mocked casket draped in a flag” (a photograph of this scene was only photograph of the march published).
In addition to the dramatic language and actions of demonstrators, the presence or absence of police activity is also a common subject of press coverage. Most press stories relaying a pro-choice or pro-life demonstration are driven by the same set of questions: how many people participated, what were they doing and where, and, was anyone arrested? Indeed nearly one-fifth of all stories referencing demonstrations focused primarily on police action and/or the commonplace arrest.

To control the definition of the issue, and thus who becomes involved, group members seek to control the language of the debate. This can be done with much success by telling a sympathetic story, such as that of Rosie Jimenez who died as a result of a "back alley" abortion. Statements quoted in these news stories (made perhaps at a rally, during a convention, or in response to a governmental decision and often no less dramatic than demonstrations), clearly served this purpose. Common language used here by both pro-life supporters and pro-choice supporters is the language of violence and war, such as when the leader of Operation Rescue routinely called doctors who perform abortions "massmurderers"\(^{21}\) or when a speaker at a Washington rally deplored "the Supreme Court's slaughter of innocents."\(^{22}\) An often repeated war theme involved comparing abortion to the Nazi Holocaust: "What if you were a citizen of Munich in World War II and you smelled the smoke of the burning  

Jews from Dachau? Would you have said that you weren't entitled to impose your morality against that?” 23

Though pro-life groups may have used this language more consistently than pro-choicers, violence could also be a moving symbol for supporters of abortion, particularly when “death, infection, back alleys, coat hangers, unwanted children, and child abuse” were are imagined. 24 The language of war was also invoked when pro-choicers declared that “The Supreme Court has declared war on American women.”

Just as the language of violence was used to mobilize both abortion supporters and opponents, the language of rights is promoted by both as well. As one National Women’s Political Caucus attendee said, “The tragedy of denial of funds for abortions under Medicaid is that we are denying women basic constitutional rights. . . . It is not a matter of giving women something. By refusing, we deny these women guaranteed privileges of citizenship.” Extending these rights to the unborn is, of course, the desire of pro-life supporters.

This brief description of a few of the stories included in this study is illustrative of the type of coverage given these groups. Thus, rather than providing a pro-abortionist propaganda vehicle, this study finds that the overwhelming number of stories that focused on groups engaged in this debate simply reported the activities of group members as they spoke to the public and political officials (through marches, campaign

activity, or lobbying efforts). In fact, most stories provided no more than a 1.5:1 ratio of references. Thus for every one and a half references to a pro-life group (or pro-choice group) or quote from a pro-life (pro-choice) representative, someone from the other side was referenced or quoted. A 1989 Washington Post article provides a good example. Under the headline “Thousands to Rally for Abortion Rights,” activities included in what was called “pro-choice Sunday” are discussed followed by demonstrations planned by Operation Rescue.25

As can be seen in Table 2, the ratio of negative pro-life stories to neutral pro-life stories is .07:1 while the ratio of negative to neutral pro-choice stories is .04:1. Thus seven percent of pro-life stories left the reader with a negative impression while four percent of pro-choice stories did. An example of a negative pro-life story quotes one clinic worker blaming the violence that is sometimes perpetrated on clinics, and staffers on pro-life rhetoric: “They never tell you to go firebomb a clinic, but they have ways of firing up the troops. They use inflammatory rhetoric which contributes to the climate of violence.”26 A clinic escort was quoted as saying, “Operation Rescue’s anti-abortion activists gave us - and undoubtedly the women seeking to enter the Wichita clinic - the feeling of imminent attack. They taunt. They chant. They grab. . . . Implicit is the feeling that the women are going to be hurt.”27

26 “Arsonist’s Attack Haunts Abortion Clinic,” Los Angeles Times, April 1, 1979, VII, 6.
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26 “Arsonist’s Attack Haunts Abortion Clinic,” Los Angeles Times, April 1, 1979, VII, 6.
With respect to the negative stories found in this study, there are some patterns. Most pro-life negatives involved harassment, particularly the families and children of clinic doctors and staff, sending hate mail and death threats, or engaging in or promoting violence. Negative pro-choice stories focused on the lives that aborted children would not be living, disabled citizens who might otherwise have been aborted, men's rights, and funding issues.

Conclusion

The attention given to this issue by the media has included coverage of abortion as a moral, religious, political, and health issue, as well as advertisements of abortion services and anti-abortion crusades by newspaper editors and reporters. Though the most influential actors in this area are the courts (who adjudicate questions of privacy, constitutionality, and personhood), executives (who appoint justices and have access to the "bully pulpit"), and legislatures (who can restrict access to and funding for this procedure), most observers quickly conclude that the activity of groups, such as the National Abortion Rights Action League, and the National Right to Life Committee, often fuels the fire of conflict and keeps this issue on the agenda of these governmental officials, the public and the press.

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28 See Appendix A for a list of many of the groups encountered in this study.
As such, this study has focused on the press coverage of these groups. Both pro-choice and pro-life forces sought to generate press coverage (often after having suffered a defeat in the political arena) in an attempt to expand the scope of the conflict, bring added support from the public, and receive a favorable hearing from government. To do this, groups seeking to influence this issue attempt to capture the attention of the press and use it as a vehicle through which to communicate their message. To promote this coverage, group members accommodate the media’s needs by providing statements and actions filled with drama, conflict, and symbols. A great deal of emotion is displayed as pro-choice and pro-life supporters engage in demonstrations, sit-ins, and direct confrontation with one another. Some marchers carry signs demanding “liberty,” and “equality” while others display “murdered” babies, “blood soaked” coat hangers and pictures of “back alley” deaths from unsafe procedures. These events receive press coverage perhaps because of the ease with which a story can be produced, the desire to sell newspapers (high emotion, drama, and confrontation appeal to readers), and the expectation of coverage by at least some portion of the public.

The assumption here has been that both pro-choice and pro-life groups benefit from press coverage that communicates their activities as well as their definition of the issue. With coverage the press can be a vehicle through which to favorably define or frame the issue for the intended audience: voters and government officials. Stories reporting the strategies of pro-life and pro-choice groups are commonplace, with coverage focusing on reaction to a governmental decision (such as the introduction of
legislation that would limit Medicaid funding or the appointment of an unsympathetic Cabinet member), anticipation of a decision (such as a Supreme Court ruling), campaign activity in support of or in opposition to a particular candidate, or reaction to one another's strategies.

Finally, this study also finds that most of the articles referencing pro-choice or pro-life groups were neutral and followed an action-reaction format. For example, while a story detailing a clinic blockade primarily deals with pro-life supporters, reactions from pro-choice leaders (whether they were present at the blockade or not) were sought and included in most blockade-related articles. Similarly, stories including a negative reference to pro-choice supporters (such as a quotation that casts doubt on their compassion toward the unborn) routinely balanced that with a negative reference to pro-life supporters (perhaps a quotation accusing pro-lifers of being racist and classist). Thus, whereas much of the press coverage given to this issue emphasizes drama, power struggles, confrontation and conflict, it is balanced.
Bibliography


Cohn 1975.


Crouch and Damphousse


Edelman


Graber, Doris. 1979


Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder


Krosnick and Kinder


McKuen


Mishra 1979
Nimmo


Patterson and David 1985

Robinson and Sheehan 1983
Shaw and McCombs
Stovell 1985.
Van Driel and Richardson
Figure 1
Percentage of Articles Referencing Groups, 1973-1983
Figure 2
Percentage of Articles Referencing Groups, 1984-1993
## Table 1
Press Coverage of Abortion Groups by Subject: 1973-1993

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations/Marches</td>
<td>44 (50%)</td>
<td>55 (60%)</td>
<td>15 (47%)</td>
<td>43 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Activity</td>
<td>24 (27%)</td>
<td>16 (17%)</td>
<td>12 (37%)</td>
<td>16 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying Activity</td>
<td>23 (26%)</td>
<td>26 (28%)</td>
<td>8 (25%)</td>
<td>17 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press Conference/Statement</td>
<td>17 (19%)</td>
<td>15 (16%)</td>
<td>5 (16%)</td>
<td>16 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting/Convention</td>
<td>9 (10%)</td>
<td>12 (13%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>10 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawsuit</td>
<td>10 (11%)</td>
<td>11 (12%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>12 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>13 (15%)</td>
<td>11 (12%)</td>
<td>4 (12%)</td>
<td>11 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>7 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Articles</strong></td>
<td><strong>87</strong></td>
<td><strong>91</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
<td><strong>76</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages may exceed 100 because articles may focus on more than one subject.*
Table 2
Ratio of Negative Abortion Stories in Four Major Newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Pro-Choice</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Pro-Life</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neg.</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
<td>Neg.</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>.05:1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>.08:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>.04:1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>.07:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.04:1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>.07:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>.03:1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>.05:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>.04:1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>.07:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A
Groups Referenced in Abortion Articles

Pro-Choice

Abortion Rights Action League
Action for Abortion Rights
Catholics for a Free Choice
Citizens for Abortion Rights and Religious Liberties
Coalition for a Free Choice
Feminist Coalition
National Abortion Rights Action League
National Organization for Women
National Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress
National Women's Political Caucus
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights
Right to Choose
Women's Equity Action League
Women's Law Project

Pro-Life

American Collegians for Life
American Life Lobby
Coalition for Life
Feminists for Life
March for Life
Mothers for Life
National Committee for a Human Life Amendment
National Right-To-Life Committee
New Jersey Right-To-Life Committee
New York Right-To-Life Foundation
Operation Rescue
Pro-Life Action Committee
Pro-Life Action Council
Right to Life
Right to Lifers
Right to Life Party