

Background

News has unique power to shape public understanding of abortion and government's role in regulating or protecting it. Prior research on coverage of abortion in U.S. newspapers (Woodruff 2018) found:

- Abortion was usually only mentioned in news coverage rather than covered substantively.
- Abortion was framed as a symbolic/political issue more than a health or policy issue.
- News rarely included pregnant people's stories (4% of coverage) or basic facts on abortion (1-5% of coverage).

Methods

We searched online databases for 5 major U.S. newspapers, capturing every story including the term "abortion" published January 1, 2022 - June 30, 2023.



We conducted multi-method analyses:

- Descriptive analysis of the entire corpus.
- Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) analysis: a Natural Language Processing tool for text analysis; identifies frequent terms that are "distinguishing" in a corpus.
- Ethnographic content analysis of 5% random sample, proportional by source and month. Team of 4 coded for story depth (substantive vs. mention), personal stories, type of speakers quoted, and basic facts included.

Key Takeaways

- *Post-Dobbs*, abortion is newsworthy, and usually covered as a serious policy issue. Research on harms of abortion restrictions is sometimes included in simplified forms.
- Pregnant people's stories are still uncommon in news coverage and focus on atypical cases. Basic pregnancy and abortion facts are included more often than *pre-Dobbs* but are still relatively rare.
- News could be doing more to help the public understand abortion as a safe, common, vital form of reproductive health care.

Results

Our search yielded **11,864 news pieces** mentioning abortion. Newspaper coverage of abortion spiked after the *Dobbs* leak and decision and the 2022 midterm elections; it remained higher throughout the study period, compared to *pre-Dobbs*.

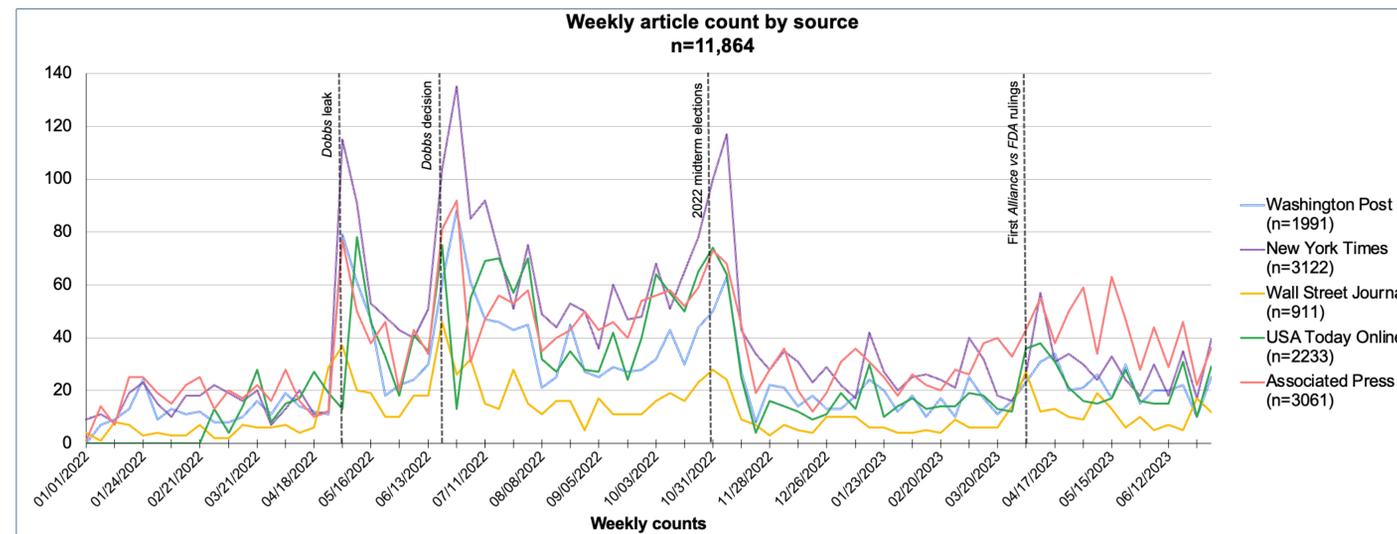
Common themes (TF-IDF analysis) of in-depth stories:

- abortion law and policy (SCOTUS and *Dobbs*, state laws)
- abortion politics (elections, political parties, candidates)
- medication abortion (FDA, abortion pill).

More than half of news stories covered abortion substantively, reporting on serious policy issues.

Quotes from politicians (in 51% of stories) and lawyers (29%) dominate abortion coverage; healthcare providers (15%) and researchers (10%) are quoted far less often.

1 in 5 stories (20%) included a pregnant person's personal abortion story, mostly focused on rare cases (child rape victims, complications in wanted pregnancies).



Basic Facts appearing in substantive abortion stories

Fact	% of stories including this fact
Abortion is common.	7%
Abortion is safe.	6%
The majority of U.S. abortions are now medication abortions.	5%
Abortion medications are available by mail/online.	5%
Abortion restrictions cause barriers or delays to care.	34%
Not being able to get an abortion can harm the pregnant person (their health, finances, and/or family).	14%
Pregnancy and delivery are potentially physically harmful.	20%
Physical risks of pregnancy are higher for people of color.	4%

Implications for the Field

- The newsworthiness of abortion policy and politics represents an important opportunity.
- There is a need for ongoing reporter education about basic pregnancy and abortion facts.
- Providers and researchers should increase efforts to translate and share their work with journalists.
- Supporting and elevating abortion storytellers is critical. Journalists should be encouraged to diversify the abortion stories they include. Qualitative research and provider experiences can help provide stories for reporters.

