

Abortion on TV in 2015

In 2015, we counted 20 times American television shows discussed abortion. For some shows, this was just a quick mention, but for 12 of these cases, it was a central part of an ongoing story.

Each of these 12 storylines included a character making (or who had made) a decision about getting an abortion. In 8 cases, the character actually got an abortion—that means 67% of the characters depicted consider abortion had an abortion. (This is on par with our 2014 data, where 11 abortion stories featured 7 characters getting abortions. However, it does represent a noticeable uptick from previous decades, where only 50% of characters considering abortion obtained one.) Three abortions were shown onscreen, including 2 contemporary abortion procedures, which had not previously been shown on television. Additionally, we saw the first portrayal of safe, accurate, and effective use of medication abortion.



Jane the Virgin
Network: CW

Episode: "Chapter 13"
Airdates: February 9

The CW hit *Jane the Virgin* brought up abortion in February, when Jane must consider whether an indication of a fetal abnormality during her second trimester would prompt her to get an abortion. She is sure she would not, even if the test revealed something was wrong.



Girls
Network: HBO

Episode: "Close-Up"
Airdate: February 22

After an abortion storyline that avoided an actual abortion for Jessa in Season 1 ("Vagina Panic"), *Girls* handled abortion much differently this time around. In February, Mimi-Rose gets an abortion, which she casually reveals after the fact, telling her boyfriend Adam, "I can't go for a run because I had an abortion yesterday." She rejects Adam's attempts to shame her, call her "evil," or ask her how many abortions she'd had.



The Slap
Network: NBC

Episode: "Anouk"
Airdate: February 26

Anouk faces an unplanned pregnancy, breaks up with her much younger boyfriend, tells her best friend she needs an abortion – then changes her mind. The last scene of this mini-series features her with her newborn.



Call the Midwife
Network: PBS

Episode: Episode 4.6
Airdate (U.S.): May 4

Set in post-World War II London, *Call the Midwife* featured an illegal abortion in Season 2 (Episode 2.5), and addressed abortion again this Spring. A young diabetic woman is advised to get a medically-indicated abortion (which would have been legal), but resists until her condition becomes dramatically dangerous. She eventually sadly consents to the abortion, and her mother expresses the hope that medical advances will soon let her carry a pregnancy safely.



Scandal
Network: ABC

Episode: "A Few Good Women"
Airdates: May 7

Scandal's abortion stories drew some of the most attention this year, and deservedly so. In May, Olivia helps a Naval officer who was sexually assaulted obtain an abortion. This was the first example of a contemporary abortion procedure actually being shown onscreen: the doctor is shown turning on the vacuum aspirator and inserting tools between the patient's legs, while Olivia holds her hand.



Penny Dreadful
Network: Showtime

Episode: "The Nightcomers"
Airdate: May 17

In a flashback episode, Vanessa meets a witch known as The Cut-Wife because "when the girls need a little baby killed inside of them, they come to me, I cut it out." The Cut-Wife recognizes that while the townswomen need her, they also shun her: "They send their girls to me, but for their very service they despise me. So it is always for those who do for women." The episode shows a rather graphic abortion being performed. *Penny Dreadful* works in the tradition of other shows like *Salem* and *True Blood*, which have also shown witches functioning as abortion providers.



Halt and Catch Fire

Network: AMC

Episode: "10Broad36"

Airdate: July 5

Set in 1980s Texas, this episode of Halt and Catch Fire portrays Donna telling her mother that she's had a miscarriage (and not telling her husband about her pregnancy at all), and then going to a Planned Parenthood to get an abortion. When discussing the non-existent miscarriage, she reflects that it's for the best and that her family is complete – she is getting an abortion, unapologetically, simply because she does not want to have more children. It's rare for married characters to get abortions, and it's even more rare for mothers to get abortion on television. Given that most real women who get abortion are mothers, this representation is an important one.



Masters of Sex

Network: Showtime

Episode: "Three's a Crowd"

Airdate: July 19

In 1960s America, Masters of Sex's Virginia finds out she's pregnant with her ex-husband's child, makes an appointment to get an abortion, and then changes her mind. Soon after, she re-marries her ex-husband, who she is very clear she doesn't love, in order to maintain a sense of respectability for her own research.



Quantico

Network: ABC

Episode: "Run"

Airdate: September 27

The series premiere of Quantico included a story in which FBI agents-in-training needed to discover each another's secrets. Turns out that Eric's secret was that, while on a Latter Day Saints mission in Malawi, he impregnated a 14-year-old girl and took her to get an illegal abortion, which caused her death. This revelation leads to Eric killing himself.



The Knick

Network: Cinemax

Episodes: Many

Airdate: Beginning

October 16

The first season of The Knick, set in the early 1900s New York City, featured a woman dying from an illegal procedure ("Where's the Dignity?") and Cornelia seeking an abortion for herself ("Crutchfield"), as well as introducing Sister Harriet, a Roman Catholic nun and illegal abortion provider. This year, Sister Harriet is arrested for performing abortions, and depends upon corrupt ambulance driver Cleary and her former patients – either through generosity or blackmail – to work for her release.



Scandal

Network: ABC

Episode: "Baby, It's Cold Outside"

Airdates: November 19

Like Scandal's abortion portrayal earlier this year, this episode also depicted an onscreen abortion – this time for Olivia herself. As before, there is no agonizing – indeed, no conversation at all – over the decision to end the pregnancy.



Please Like Me

Network: Pivot

Episode: "Pancakes with Faces"

Airdates: November 20

This Australian show, which airs on Pivot TV in the US, featured Claire getting a medication abortion with the support of her partner. It realistically followed her through the procedure, from the clinic to completing the abortion at home. Claire thoughtfully reflects on the experience, her feminist politics, and her judgement of other women at the clinic: "I guess I didn't want them to think I was like the other girls. I'm furious at myself for thinking that." This episode aired the same day that Jessica Jones was released on Netflix, thus tying for first for realistic depictions of medication abortion on American TV.



Jessica Jones

Network: Netflix

Episode: "AKA You're a Winner!"

Release date: November 20

Incarcerated character Hope pays a fellow prisoner to beat her up, in the hopes that it will induce a miscarriage. When Jessica later meets her at the hospital, Hope reveals to her that she's pregnant with Kilgrave's baby and can't access an abortion provider in prison. She describes the torture of being pregnant as the result of an assault: "Every second it's there, I get raped again and again... I won't give life to this thing." Jessica sneaks her medication to end the pregnancy, in what is the first safe, effective use of medication abortion on television. Hope later dies from causes unrelated to the abortion.



The Good Wife

Network: CBS

Episode: "Restraint" and others

Airdate: November 22

The Good Wife has consistently depicted abortion stories throughout the show's six seasons. However, in 2015, it has primarily portrayed abortion as a political issue revolving around feminist attorney Diane: she gets into a good-natured political debate with a potential conservative client ("Red Meat"), and later discusses pro-choice candidates with leaders from EMILY's List ("Innocents"). In the biggest abortion story this year, Diane represents an anti-abortion organization that secretly videotaped a provider discussing fetal tissue procurement ("Restraint"). Diane defends her arguments as being solely about free speech, not abortion.

QuickHits

The Good Wife (CBS)

Episode: Mind's Eye
Airdate: March 8

Alicia reflects on her son's girlfriend's abortion, which she learned about earlier last year.

True Detective (HBO)

Episode: "Other Lives"
Airdate: July 19

Jordan and her husband Frank, a career criminal, are experiencing infertility, which she believes is the result of having had three abortions in her 20s. She discloses this to her husband by obliquely using the word "operations," and he is aghast.

You're the Worst (FX)

Episode: "Born Dead"
Airdate: September 23

Gretchen discovers one of her friends is pregnant, and scoffs, "I wonder what abortions even cost these days. I should go with her! We could get post-abortion mani-pedis." She later discovers that her very pregnant friend is fully intending to have the baby.

Quantico (ABC)

Episode: "America"
Airdate: October 4

Following the abortion storyline in the show's premiere, the second episode portrayed the trainees investigating a hypothetical Planned Parenthood bombing as part of a teaching exercise, which turns out to be a fake threat. Their instructor delivers this moral about such threats: "As with most zealots, this was not an imminent threat."

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend (CW)

Episode: "Josh Just Happens to Live Here!"
Airdate: October 12

In a flashback that opens the first moments of the new series, teenage Rebecca's mother notices her daughter has a hickey, and says to her: "Anything happens, we go right to the abortionist. Nothing, nothing is going to ruin your future."

Jane the Virgin (CW)

Episode: "Chapter 25"
Airdates: October 26

In the second abortion discussion for Jane the Virgin in 2015, Petra presents three options for a pregnancy that she deceptively conceived using Rafael's sperm sample: "One, I get an abortion. Two, in the next month or so, I find someone. Let's say a Russian oligarch, I sleep with him, tell him the baby's his... Three, I stay here in Miami and we raise him or her together." She does not decide to end the pregnancy. (Jane's mother, Xiomara, votes for the abortion.)



Abortion Onscreen Project at ANSIRH

American film and television are critical places where cultural narratives about abortion and reproductive decision-making play out. The Abortion Onscreen research program aims to investigate these stories and understand their effects on broader social understandings of abortion.

To date, the Abortion Onscreen researchers have analyzed abortion story outcomes in all American film and television since 1916, and depictions of abortion patients on television in the last decade. Researchers are currently working on examinations of portrayals of abortion providers, barriers, and procedures. The most recently published data is available in the journal *Contraception*:

Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport, "Facts and Fictions: Characters seeking abortion on American television, 2005-2014." (2015). *Contraception*.

Abortion Onscreen is a project at Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH) at the University of California, San Francisco. For more information, infographics, and links to recent publications, visit abortiononscreen.org.