



Original research article

“The stakes are so high”: interviews with progressive journalists reporting on abortion^{☆,☆☆}

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Abstract

Objectives: Because news frames can influence public and policy agendas, proponents of abortion access should be concerned with how this issue is covered in the news. While previous research has examined the content of news on abortion, this analysis explores the process of newsmaking on abortion, examining how journalists understand their role in and experience of covering abortion.

Study design: We recruited journalists with experience reporting on abortion through listservs for progressive and feminist reporters. Thirty-one participants, with experiences at 75 diverse media outlets, completed in-depth, open-ended interviews. We used grounded theory to code interview transcripts in Dedoose to identify emergent themes.

Results: Journalists described many challenges that applied to reporting generally, but that they perceived to be more difficult around abortion: grappling with the meaning of “neutrality” on this issue, finding new angles for articles, and handling editors with varying knowledge of abortion. Over one-third ($n=13$) of participants mentioned feeling that the stakes were higher around abortion: this urgency and polarization left journalists frustrated by efforts to find new sources or angles on abortion stories. Finally, over 80% ($n=28$) of participants reported experiencing anti-abortion harassment as a result of their abortion work.

Conclusions: The difficulties journalists described when reporting on abortion were often rooted in abortion stigma and the political polarization around the issue. This pattern was true even for reporters who worked to counter abortion stigma through their reporting.

Implications: Advocates interested in accurate, destigmatizing news frames might work pro-actively to educate editors and increase reporters’ access to providers, patients, and advocates.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, few public debates are as fraught as those around abortion. Media-effects research indicates that news media can powerfully influence that debate, both through setting policy agendas [1–3] and framing the way in which the public and policymakers understand the issue [4–6]. Thus, those concerned with the overall quality of abortion coverage should work to understand the challenges inherent in reporting on this topic.

Prior research on abortion reporting has examined how rhetoric and media frames have shifted [7,8], becoming increasingly partisan [9] and homogenized [10,11]. The cultural abortion debate extends into newsrooms: conservative journalists decry a perceived bias in support of abortion rights among their colleagues [12–15], while progressive outlets criticize abortion stigma and misinformation in news coverage [16,17]. Research supports these latter criticisms, finding that media frequently use negative language and framing when covering abortion [18,19], and that such frames work to produce abortion stigma [20,21].

Journalist’s practices are also rapidly shifting. Digital technologies and social media have compressed news cycles and increased pressures to publish stories quickly, which may conflict with traditional journalistic values of accuracy and balance [22,23]. Economic pressures have reduced

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reporting staffs [24,25] and increased outlets' reliance on freelance reporters, who are more frequently women [26] and potentially more entrepreneurial than staff reporters [27,28].

Given the tremendous potential of media to impact how abortion is understood and the quickly evolving ways in which news is reported, this paper explores the critical question of how journalists understand their role in and experience of covering abortion today.

2. Methods

Between April and June 2016, we conducted 31 in-depth interviews with journalists who had reported on abortion. Allendale, an independent institutional review board, approved our recruitment and protocol.

2.1. Recruitment

To recruit participants, we emailed two listservs for journalists, with follow-up emails to individuals we identified, through their previous work, to be subscribers. We did not recruit journalists of any particular political leaning; however, these listservs are run by organizations dedicated to creating community for feminist-identified journalists. After each interview, we asked participants to recommend additional interviewees. In total, we sent out 107 interview requests based on these referrals.

2.2. Sample

The sample included some diversity of age, race/ethnicity, and geographic location, though there was a notably high frequency of white participants, and participants in the northeastern United States (Table 1). Most participants were women. There was wide diversity in income; monthly household incomes ranged from \$1500 to \$25,000.

About two-thirds of participants ($n=20$) were staff writers, while the remaining participants ($n=11$) were freelance reporters. Participants had experience writing at 75 different media outlets, including television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, with a range of distributions (i.e., international, national, regional) and audiences (e.g., general interest, progressive, feminist). While all participants had experience reporting on abortion, very few described abortion or reproductive health as their sole area of focus.

2.3. Interviews

The second author and a research assistant, both trained in qualitative methods, completed 31 phone interviews, until jointly concluding that we had achieved saturation. Interviews ranged from 21 to 88 min, with an average of 45 min. In compensation for their time, interviewers offered participants a \$10 gift card. After collecting demographic information, we asked participants to describe their under-

Table 1
Demographic characteristics

	Frequency
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	2
Female	29
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
White	22
Black	3
Latinx	2
Asian	1
Biracial/Mixed	3
<i>Age</i>	
21–30	7
31–40	13
41–50	6
51–60	3
61–70	2
<i>Region</i>	
Northeast	15
Midatlantic	5
Southeast	2
Midwest	1
Southwest	4
West Coast	4

standing of their role in covering abortion and any difficulties they encountered in doing so.

2.4. Analysis

After each interview, the interviewers compiled shared notes, which they used to identify emergent themes and develop a preliminary code list. We audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the interviews in Dedoose, using modified grounded theory techniques [29]. The iterative process of coding and analysis allowed for identification of new themes, including codes that captured recurring experiences (e.g., anti-abortion harassment), and challenges (e.g., the need to remain neutral). The second author coded all transcripts, in consultation with the research assistant. The first author reviewed all coded transcripts in full; the first and second authors jointly decided when analytical saturation was reached.

3. Results

Participants faced several challenges in covering abortion: varying understandings of neutrality, editorial obstacles, difficulty finding new sources and angles for stories, and harassment from anti-abortion advocates. While many of these challenges also pertain to reporting on other topics [30], our analysis is primarily concerned with how such challenges manifest when covering abortion, with the intent of providing insight into how news coverage of abortion might be improved.

3.1. Conceptualizing neutrality

Most participants ($n=20$) spoke about the importance of neutrality in abortion reporting, though they had different understandings of what that meant and how best to achieve it.

More than one-fourth ($n=9$) of participants understood neutrality as an equal presentation of opposing arguments, and believed it was important not to include their own views in their reporting. Claudia, 47, stated: “I can’t have an opinion when I write these stories.” For many, editors reinforced this understanding of neutrality:

[Editors] are always saying, you need to talk to the National Right to Life if you’re going to talk to the Planned Parenthood Action Fund... There’s a lot there in trying to figure out what balance means in this particular topic. (Miriam, 31)

While these participants stressed the importance of presenting both sides, they also reported that pressure to be perceived as unbiased is higher when reporting on abortion, in contrast to other issues:

There’s a lot more willingness to let people [sources] talk about racial injustice without kind of feeling like they have to hedge it.. [In abortion] there’s more having to explain both sides. (Natalia, 57)

In contrast, over one-third ($n=11$) of participants explained that they did not conceptualize neutrality as needing to present both anti- and pro-abortion rights arguments with equal weight. Rather, they felt a responsibility to their audience to clearly address differences in merit between the two sides, believing that simply presenting contrasting arguments would be a disservice:

I think that a journalist should focus more on trying to extract the truth and not necessarily trying to just give a platform for people to speak on both sides of the issue. (Claudia, 47)

The journalistic trope of “fairness and balance” seems to mean simply quoting people saying falsehoods... You accurately quoted a bunch of lies. (Corrine, 69)

Several participants connected including anti-abortion arguments with including misinformation, a connection that is supported in by prior literature examining the anti-abortion movement’s intentional use of inaccurate messaging and the public’s overall low levels of knowledge about abortion’s safety and legality [31–35]. For these respondents, this commitment to neutrality – where they attempt to report their understanding of the truth, rather than creating false balance

by including claims not based in evidence – was rooted in a moral obligation:

I can’t - in good conscience - put my byline on something that I just don’t think is right... It doesn’t need to reflect my views on abortion, but it needs to reflect the framework in which I think about these issues. (Lilly, 24)

For these participants, accuracy was of greater value than traditional journalistic conceptions of neutrality, as they questioned whether such “neutrality” is ever actually achieved in abortion reporting.

3.2. Editorial challenges

Almost two-thirds of respondents ($n=19$) cited problems with editors which made abortion reporting more challenging. All participants reported pitching stories about abortion, more often than being assigned such stories. This pattern meant that many respondents shared the challenge of convincing editors that abortion should be covered, and how.

A frequent hurdle was the need to educate editors on abortion as both a medical procedure and political issue, which they did not need to do when reporting on other topics:

It was very clear the editor thought... abortion required something akin to major surgery, like a c-section... There are a lot of assumptions that they bring to editing that are not born out in what we know about abortion. (Brenna, 41)

I find myself explaining what I would hope a news editor would understand about healthcare, how these issues are related to one another... I have observed that my [abortion] pitches are more dismissed than others, and I’m not the only one that has made that observation. (Jaidyn, 29)

3.3. Novel content

Like Jaidyn, others participants felt that editors objected to the frequency with which they pitched abortions stories, attributing this, at least in part, to the difficulty in finding new ways to write about abortion. Thirteen participants mentioned this as a particular challenge:

The points that you’re making are often the same over and over again... It can be hard to kind of come up with new ways to say some of those things and not feel like a broken record. (Amira, 33)

When reporters did try to seek out new angles for stories, they often struggled to find sources. Half of participants ($n=16$) shared that they found it hard to identify new sources

around abortion, whether they were seeking out providers, patients, or researchers:

The biggest trouble with reporting on abortion is, as far as I'm concerned, the defensiveness of people at abortion clinics. [Clients] don't want to talk about it, [and] the doctors are very preoccupied with their work. (Nicholas, 61)

One of the things that I have found most difficult over the years is finding academics who can talk about this... who are not also advocates of either side. There are a few, but not a lot. That's always been my biggest hurdle. In health care there's a bazillion academics. They're constantly bombarding me. That's so not the case in abortion. (Miriam, 31)

Because of the difficulty accessing sources with clinical, academic, or personal abortion experience, some participants relied on advocates instead – even though those advocates frequently used the same “talking points,” contributing to a uniformity of abortion coverage. Here, Margaret points to the shortcomings of advocates as sources:

[Advocates] who are used to talking about abortion are pretty good at it because you have to be because the stakes are so high. It's difficult to find those stories, those people, those sources who might have really fascinating things to say about abortion... but who are uncomfortable talking about it. (Margaret, 32)

This theme was reiterated by many participants: abortion coverage lacked interesting nuance because, frequently, the same sources were used to make the same arguments, and journalists struggled to new ways to cover the issue that would capture editors' interest.

3.4. Harassment

Most participants reported experiencing harassment as a result of abortion reporting; 24 of 31 participants had faced some form of it. This harassment ranged from “nasty tweets” to “death threats,” a pattern consistent with the experiences of others affiliated with abortion, such as providers and patients [36]. Some journalists' experiences became particularly alarming:

Antis [anti-abortion advocates] tweeted out my home address. So that was an issue for me as a writer and it did have a chilling effect... It made me really terrified. (Brenna, 41)

Most participants expressed that they were initially “devastated” and “overwhelmed” by the harassment, but that it had become, for them, an expected part of covering

abortion – even as they believed their editors were surprised by the level of vitriol that abortion journalists faced.

4. Discussion

Our findings reveal a number of ways in which abortion journalists experience, produce, and challenge stigma in the course of their work. They experience abortion stigma personally: harassment was participants' most commonly shared experience. Some journalists may also produce stigma, as their quest for balance compels them to give equal weight to scientifically unproven claims of anti-abortion activists; others may challenge stigma, as they attempt to debunk or provide an accurate counterpoint to such claims.

In turn, stigma can impact news coverage in several ways. First, because abortion is perceived as a tainted subject [20,21], journalists and outlets may want to distance themselves from it. This contributes to the perception of abortion as a low-prestige or niche issue, with implications for who covers it and how well.

Second, stigma can increase a journalist's desire to be seen as unbiased, leading to the incorporation of misinformation into news coverage. This impulse toward even-handed reporting on all sides of a controversy has been described as “false equivalency,” and documented around topics such as climate change [37]; our respondents report a similar struggle when covering abortion.

Third, stigma contributes to social silence around abortion, which makes it more challenging to find unique sources. Thus, abortion coverage becomes less informative, less compelling, and more uniform – all of which could further limit an editor's interest in covering abortion.

Forth, because stigma makes reporting on abortion harder for journalists than it might otherwise be (e.g., through the need to educate editors, harassment), they might be less likely to continue doing so. These patterns contribute to an overall diminishment of the quality, urgency, and relevance of abortion journalism.

Our findings have several limitations. First, because interviews focused primarily on abortion reporting, we are unable to draw conclusions about whether the challenges described are more common in this area than others. While our participants certainly perceived this to be the case, there is prior literature and commentary indicating that such challenges exist in many areas of journalism [30,38,39]. Second, the demographics of our sample do not reflect the overall population of U.S. reporters. Compared to a large-scale survey of reporters [40], participants in our sample were more frequently women (93% v. 37.5%) and more frequently under the age of 35 (48% v. 24%). Additionally, our sample was more diverse, and had a lower proportion of white participants than the general pool of reporters (70% v. 90%). These differences might be the result of our method of recruitment, or they could suggest

that journalists who cover abortion are demographically different from journalists generally. If this pattern is indeed a result of recruitment strategy, these journalists' accounts still provide important insight into the challenges in achieving accurate and destigmatizing abortion reporting.

If, however, journalists who cover abortion are demographically distinct from other journalists, particularly with regards to gender, there are a number of potential consequences to be explored: the framing of abortion as a "niche" women's issue, the associating of abortion with the challenges of lower-prestige, lower-paid reporting that many women journalists face [41]; and the high rates of harassment, which are generally reported more frequently by women journalists than their male colleagues [42]. Further research is needed to explore whether this gender difference plays a role in the stigmatization of abortion reporting.

Finally, our conclusions must be viewed in light of our initial recruitment strategy via listservs for feminist journalists. This sampling limits our ability to generalize our conclusions to journalists of varying ideologies. However, it also reveals that these challenges are present even among those journalists that might be most motivated to portray abortion in an accurate and destigmatizing way. Thus, this sample represents those most likely to respond to thoughtful outreach by advocates.

Because news media can powerfully influence public beliefs and political actions around abortion [3,43–46], those committed to accurate, informative coverage should strive to understand journalists' experiences in covering abortion. Our findings suggest that if academic and clinical experts were more available and open as sources, this might help provide fresh perspectives to abortion journalism. Additionally, abortion-rights advocates might find a role in educating editors and otherwise supporting journalists covering abortion, so that potential editorial barriers or consequent harassment are more easily overcome.

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