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Introduction

The role of journalism in covering abortion has often been subject to strong debate: conservative journalists decry a perceived abortion-rights bias amongst their colleagues, while progressive outlets criticize abortion stigma in news coverage. While research supports these latter criticisms, finding that media frequently use negative framing around abortion, the debate continues. The recent emergence of covertly recorded videos prompted a cultural conversation on what constitutes journalism around abortion at all, and what the role of journalists should be.

To date, much of the research around abortion reporting has examined how rhetoric and media frames have shifted over time, becoming increasingly partisan and homogenized. To begin to understand how to foster accurate, meaningful abortion reporting, this research examines how journalists understand their role in and experience of covering abortion.

Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n = 35)	
Age	
21-30	8
31-40	16
41-50	6
51-60	3
61-70	2
Race/Ethnicity	
White	26
Black	3
Latinx	2
Asian	1
Bi-Racial / Mixed	3
Gender	
Female	33
Male	2
Region	
Northeast	19
Midatlantic	5
Southeast	2
Midwest	1
Southwest	4
West coast	4

Methods

In early 2016, we conducted 35 in-depth interviews with journalists who had previously reported on abortion, who were recruited via two email listservs for journalists, and well as via referrals from other participants. During the open-ended, semi-structured interviews, we collected demographic data and then asked participants to describe: the writing and editing process at their outlet, their understanding of their role in covering abortion, what, if any, difficulties they encountered in abortion reporting, and if and how covering abortion is different than other issues.

Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. When the research team jointly decided we had reached thematic saturation, data collection concluded. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed and analyzed in Dedoose using grounded theory, following a code list collectively developed by the research team.

Results

Participants had experience reporting on abortion at 81 different media outlets, including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc., with a range of distributions and audiences. About two-thirds (n=24) were currently employed as staff writers, while the remaining participants (n=11) worked as freelance reporters.

Most participants (n=21) spoke about the importance of neutrality in abortion reporting, though they had different understandings of what that meant and how best to achieve it. About one-fourth (n=9) of participants understood neutrality as an equal presentation of opposing arguments, and believed it was important not to share their own opinions on abortion publicly. In contrast, slightly over one-third (n=12) of participants explained that they did not conceptualize neutrality as needing to present both anti-abortion and pro-abortion rights arguments with equal weight.

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

Corrine, 69

Participants reported barriers within their news institutions, and difficulties in finding new content and sources, as additional challenges when covering abortion. More than half of respondents (n=19) cited problems with editors, including the need to educate them around abortion as both a medical procedure and political issue. Others had encountered editors who objected to the frequency with which journalists pitched abortion stories, and dismissed abortion as a topic of lesser importance. To some extent, participants felt this was partially rooted in the difficulty in finding new ways to write about abortion. Approximately one-third (n=13) of participants mentioned this as a challenge.

“I find myself explaining what I would hope a news editor would understand about healthcare... I have also observed that my [abortion] pitches are more dismissed than other pitches.”

Jaidyn, 29

When reporters did try to seek out new angles for stories, they often struggled to find sources. Nearly half (n=16) of participants shared that they found it hard to identify new sources around abortion, whether they were seeking out providers, patients, or researchers. Because of the difficulty identifying such sources, some participants relied on advocates instead – even though those advocates frequently used the same “talking points” and contributed to a uniformity of abortion coverage. 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.

“The biggest trouble with reporting on abortion is...the defensiveness of people at abortion clinics...the doctors are very preoccupied with their work, a lot of the clients don't want to use their names or don't want to talk.”

Nicholas, 61

“Advocates who are used to talking about abortion are pretty good at it because...the stakes are so high. It's difficult to find...those sources who might have fascinating things to say about abortion...but who are uncomfortable talking.”

Margaret, 32

Participants’ most commonly shared experience was harassment as a result of abortion reporting; 28 of 35 participants had faced some form of it. This harassment ranged from “nasty tweets” to “death threats.” Most participants expressed that they were initially “devastated” by the harassment, but that it had become, for them, an expected part of covering abortion – even as editors were surprised by the level of vitriol that abortion journalists faced.

“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

Implications

The difficulties journalists described when reporting on abortion were often rooted in abortion stigma and political polarization. This pattern was true even for reporters who worked to counter abortion stigma through their reporting, and worked in a number of way:

- 1) Abortion is viewed as a low-prestige or niche issue, which impacts who is covering it and how well;
- 2) Social silence around abortion makes it challenging to find unique and novel sources;
- 3) Stigma makes covering abortion challenge (i.e., need to educate editors, harassment, etc.), making it less likely reporters will continue to cover it in a meaningful way.

Each of these factors contributes to an overall diminishment of abortion coverage, as pertains to its quality, urgency, and relevance.

Advocates invested in accurate, destigmatizing news frames might work pro-actively to increase the level of access reporters have to providers, patients, and advocates.