
Abortion, Morality and the Murky Middle: A Challenge to the Media

by Thomas C. Fox

The 1994 Pennsylvania abortion law creates a new dimension to the abortion controversy, moving it, not only from the national level to the state level, but also out of the realm of absolutes and into the murky arena of conditionals. As restrictions are placed by states on abortions, the media must, with compromise and moral discernment, assume the responsibility of articulating to the public the political reasoning leading to restrictions on this complex moral and political issue. The press has often failed to meet this challenge, for reasons that range from the difficulty in reporting moral and religious issues to the media's tendency to report only the extreme views of an issue, ignoring the vast array of opinions that reside in the "middle." The challenge to the media is to enter the arena with penetrating reporting that gets behind the issues and examines the reality of abortion in the lives of real people. The jury is still out on whether they will meet the challenge.

When Pennsylvania's abortion law went into effect March 20, 1994, it ushered in a new era in the abortion controversy, a debate that has captured much public attention—and generated more heat than light.

The Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act, written by state lawmakers opposed to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 decision legalizing abortion, requires women to receive counseling from a doctor about the risks of and alternatives to abortion, then wait a day before getting one. It requires single girls younger than eighteen to get the permission of a parent or a judge. And it requires clinics to offer booklets that explain the risks of abortion and include a list of agencies that offer options to abortion.

This new law pleases neither of the traditional and most vocal combatants in the abortion debate: those who want all abortions banned and those who feel that any restrictions violate a woman's right to choose. By 1992, when the United States Supreme Court ruled on Pennsylvania's law allowing states to place more restrictions on abortions, the debate had entered a new and more complex phase. It not only moved from the national to the state level, but it stepped back from absolutes into conditionals, from the "always" or "never" into the more murky "sometimes." Once legislative restrictions are the order of the day in some states, then the political reasoning leading to these restrictions must be articulated by compromise and a greater moral discernment.

This, in turn, has posed far greater challenges to the media, requiring greater sophistication in press and broadcast coverage for such discernment to take place. But abortion coverage by the U.S. media has been, by and large, lackluster—spotty at best. It may not be up to the challenge.

The political pendulum appears to be swinging back from virtually unlimited abortion on demand to considerations of restrictions on those rights, from a discussion almost solely focused on the rights of women to choose, into a realm that also includes the rights of the unborn to life. To date, the Pennsylvania law is the most visible sign of this shift. Other states are in the process of adopting similar restrictions.

While the Pennsylvania law remains an exception to general state abortion laws, it may be the best current barometer of where most Americans stand on the abortion issue. Repeated polls support neither hard-line anti-abortionists nor abortion-rights advocates. When asked, most Americans repeatedly say they think a woman should have a legal right to an abortion. However, they also feel some legal restrictions are reasonable.

For years the polar opposites have held sway on the abortion discussion—and the media have found it easy to give voices to these polar views. For every

Thomas C. Fox is editor of The National Catholic Reporter, an independent Catholic newsweekly based in Kansas City, Missouri.

hard-line "right-to-lifer" interviewed, there has been an equally adamant "pro-choice" spokesperson making her or his views known. And neither side con-

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cedes an inch. Over the years, news coverage reporting the polar views became predictable, even boring. And when shouting and violence erupt, all the better. That is just good television newscasting.

The problem is that domination of the debate by the extremes has been aided by news media too timid to delve into the complexities of the debate beyond those holding absolute positions on either side.

Television news, in particular, lives by extremes and seldom succeeds in presenting complexities. If anything, abortion is a complex moral and political issue. The print media, on the other hand, have largely abdicated their responsibility to tell the whole story. In the name of some fuzzy neutrality, it has ignored the voice, as study after study has shown, of the largest segment of the population on the issue.

Why has this happened? Why have the media largely failed us on abortion coverage? Why have they perpetuated the heat and generated relatively less light? The answers are complex. I will suggest a few.

First, the media have almost exclusively portrayed the abortion controversy as political, not moral. Politics is easy; morality is much more complex. Over the past two decades, virtually absent in the press has been any extended, reasoned, moral assessment of the abortion issue. To have gotten into such a discussion would have revealed complexities in the abortion issue that would have betrayed the perception that only polar positions exist concerning abortion.

The easy media story has been to portray the bitterly divided political extremes. The challenging media story would be to portray the tortured and torn views of most adults who find themselves in the murky middle on abortion.

Second, television broadcasters, editors and reporters all fear getting too close to the abortion issue. Doing so would require listening to, seriously weighing and accurately portraying the moral arguments of the right-to-life movement. The largely moderate to progressive media, however, would prefer hara-kiri to appearing in the pockets of organizations viewed as anti-intellectual, anti-women and even anti-sex. While not all those in the right-to-life movement are from the far right (another largely under-reported media story), its most vocal leadership is from the right.

A few years ago, David Shaw, who has covered the news media for the *Los Angeles Times*, investigated the allegation that the news media tend to be biased in favor of abortion rights, conducting more than 100 interviews with men and women on both sides of the abortion issue. He concluded that "this bias often exists." A summary of his four-part study appeared in the October 1990 issue of the *Quill*.

"Indeed," Shaw wrote, "the earnest intentions of most journalists notwithstanding . . . there is often an implicit bias against abortion opponents, and some of that bias may stem from the media's stereotypical view of these activists." Shaw wrote that he found the "bias" appearing in a number of ways, many of them subtle. Sometimes, he noted, it showed in the type of person interviewed. Reporters looking for abortion opponents to interview, especially on television, "sometimes choose people who take extreme positions, while quoting and interviewing abortion-rights advocates who invariably seem reasonable and reputable," he wrote.

Shaw pointed out that when the RICO act—officially, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act—was used by the federal government against white collar criminals on Wall Street, major editorial pages questioned whether this was an appropriate use of the statute designed to fight the Mafia. However, when the same act was invoked in civil suits against Operation Rescue and other abortion protestors, "most of the major newspapers ignored it."

He asked why there had been so few stories raising questions about the erosion of basic rights by the "police brutality" that Operation Rescue activists have alleged in dozens of cities. In Shaw's article, such prominent journalists as Meg Greenfield and Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post*, among others, conceded a media bias.

Third, some women editors and broadcasters seem to fear assessing the arguments of those who want to provide more legal protection to the unborn. Associating with these activists or ideas could be viewed as a

betrayal of their feminist credentials. U.S. feminism, largely because its growth has come in the wake of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion,

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has meant that the test of one's feminist views is whether one believes women should have an unfettered legal right to choose an abortion. Feminism in other nations, notably England, is viewed through other prisms and does not as quickly pit the rights of a woman against the rights of the unborn.

Fourth, the abortion issue is widely associated with religion and religious interests, and the media are notoriously bad at reporting on religion in America. Media coverage of religion largely deals with the hypocrisies of television evangelists or sex-abusing priests or simply as a Sunday morning or Easter Sunday phenomena. It has ignored the deeper, more penetrating story of the way religious values continue to shape the lives of ordinary people and influence the broader social and political discussion. When abortion and religion are linked, the media end up confused, fearful and uncertain about how to engage in serious coverage. It then becomes a lot easier to portray old stereotypes—the uncompromising religious zealot being the most common—and walk away.

Penetrating abortion coverage by the media is no easy task. It requires leadership and pushing beyond stereotypes. It requires spending more time talking to people in the middle, where most people struggle to sort out the moral complexities they encounter when faced with abortion in their daily lives.

And what characterizes the middle? Hopefully reason does. And an admission of complexity—or the issue would long ago have been settled. And an extension of good will to others who do not share one's own views.

Professor Daniel Callahan, director of the Hastings Center, who calls himself "pro-choice" on abortion, has long pressed others of his persuasion to enter into a deeper moral discussion concerning the rights of the unborn. Writing recently in the fourth edition of *Bioethics* (Paulist Press), he recalled his writings on the abortion issue three years before it

was legalized in America. At that time he concluded (1) that he supported the legal right of a woman to choose abortion and (2) that such a legal right demanded those supporting it to enter into a "public discussion about the standards and criteria appropriate for such choices."

Dr. Callahan continues to express disappointment that this discussion has never really occurred. He writes: "The pro-choice movement has in fact never known quite what to do with the moral issue. For most of its leaders, it is simply set aside altogether, left to the opaque sphere of personal morality, itself a subject of uncertainty and discomfort." There exists a great deal of sociological literature on why women have abortions and occasional accounts of women's experience in making abortion decisions. Yet, Callahan writes, "there is remarkably little written about how women ought to make such private decisions, that is, thoughtful writing on the appropriate moral uses of free choice for those who have the legal right to do so."

And why not? He maintains that there is a "small but seemingly growing minority (within the pro-choice movement) for whom even the idea of discussion of the moral choice is repugnant. They either want to declare that abortion is not, in its substance, a moral question at all (only the woman's right to choose an abortion is taken to be a moral issue); or that women should not have to struggle and suffer over the choice even if it is a moral question; or that, in any case, to concede that it is a *serious* moral choice and to have a public discussion about the choice is politically hazardous, the opening wedge of a discussion that could easily lead once again to a restriction of a woman's right to an abortion. Better to declare the whole topic of the morality of abortion off-limits."

The Pennsylvania law, for better or worse, is an indicator that somehow moral and political discussion and compromise are occurring in America, whatever one thinks of the development. The media, if they are to serve the public, need the courage to enter the fray, not for "quick hits," but for penetrating reporting, the kind that gets behind the issues and into the lives of real people forced to examine the reality and prospect of abortion in their lives. Ethicists and moralists have pondered the abortion issue for many years, but it is the political activists whose voices we have heard over and over again.

There are steps the media can take to provide light and, hopefully, in the process, turn down the heat. Whether they are up to the challenge remains to be seen.