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# Journalists Struggle with Three Conflicts When Covering Abortion Politics

by John C. Ginn

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*American journalists have found it difficult to be fair and balanced in covering the national discussion about abortion rights in recent years. Major contributors to this challenge have included three conflicts: (1) It is tough to present a fair picture when the vast majority of journalists clearly favor the views of abortion-rights activists; (2) Journalists are inclined to define such a debate as two-sided, but this one has many sides, and the extreme positions do not represent majority views; (3) In their efforts to simplify and to make complex issues understandable, journalists lapse into stereotyping practices. Fortunately for the country and for American journalism, there has been some progress made in achieving balanced coverage despite these conflicts.*

Most U.S. journalists struggle with three troublesome conflicts when covering the politics of abortion. Those conflicts make the national abortion debate an especially difficult story for American journalists to cover responsibly. Fortunately, several news organizations have worked hard to overcome these conflicts, and some important progress has been made.

One element of the struggle comes when professional ethics clash with personal preferences. The ethics of journalism call for a commitment to fair and accurate coverage. Yet the mind-set and circumstances of most journalists support pro-choice attitudes.

Another piece of the struggle arises because the conventions of news reporting—especially those of political news reporting—are out of sync with the facts of today's abortion-politics story. The coverage of a political story almost always involves gathering and sharing information about a conflict. Because classic conflicts are most often thought to involve *two* sides, even fair-minded reporters typically quote a representative for each of the two sides and present the results as representing all or most of the important views in the dialogue. However, there are many diverse attitudes about abortion in this country, and the views of the often-quoted activists do not represent the thinking of most Americans.

A third piece of the struggle is prompted by the reporter's quest for clarity. A compelling avenue for clarity is simplicity. But simplicity often begets stereotyping, and stereotypes are among the ogres of many news reports about abortion politics.

These three problem areas have damaged the credibility of some U.S. news organizations and in-

dividual journalists, and they present difficult-to-resolve challenges.

## The Ethics of Fairness

In the ethics to which journalists subscribe, there are many clear commitments to the idea of fairness. For instance, the statement of principles of the American Society of Newspaper Editors includes this paragraph:

Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics includes this statement:

News reports should be free of opinion or bias and represent all sides of an issue.

The Associated Press Managing Editors Code of Ethics includes these words:

A good newspaper is fair, accurate, honest, responsible, independent and decent. Truth is its guiding principle.

Other newspaper and broadcast news organizations have codes containing similar commitments to accuracy, objectivity and fairness.

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My own professional experience suggests that such statements are supported by well-intentioned people. During thirty-five years of holding news and management jobs at nine daily newspapers, I cannot recall a colleague who was not committed to accuracy, objectivity and fairness. Some seemed more effective than others in practicing such laudable journalism, but all were interested in doing so.

### The Abortion Rights Bias

Serious research about abortion attitudes in this country points to three correlations that tend to exist in Americans' views about abortion politics. The *more education and money* a person has and the *less religion* she or he practices, the more likely that individual is to support abortion rights. Most journalists—especially those in larger cities—are well educated, earn relatively high incomes and do not practice a religion. These circumstances nudge many journalists toward a pro-choice bias.

In addition, journalists have a strong bent toward individual rights. They espouse freedom of speech. Many believe that part of their role is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, which often positions the journalist on the side of the underdog. That pro-underdog bias can be translated to the abortion-rights view when the question is whether big government should deprive an individual woman of the right to make a decision about her own pregnancy.

Exhibit 1  
Opinions on Abortion  
Do you think abortions should be:

	U.S. Journalists*	U.S. Public**
Legal under any circumstances	51%	33%
Legal under only certain circumstances	40%	49%
Or illegal in all circumstances	4%	14%
No opinion/don't know/refused	5%	4%

\*Weaver-Wilhoit Survey, 1992

\*\*Gallup Poll, 1991

Given these circumstances and attitudes, it is not surprising that survey results show that journalists tend to be more supportive of abortion-rights views than is the general public. A notable example of this bias was reflected in a 1992 survey of 1,410 U.S. journalists by Indiana University professors David Weaver and Cleveland Wilhoit. They asked a question that had been used a few months earlier in a Gallup

Poll: "Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal under only certain circumstances or illegal in all circumstances?" Note in the Exhibit 1 chart that journalists were fifty percent more likely than the general public to favor legal abortions under any circumstances. And note that the public was more than three times as likely to favor making abortions illegal in all circumstances.

Many journalists acknowledge this abortion-rights bias, and some argue that their efforts to combat the attitude in behalf of fairness sometimes results in coverage that unfairly favors activists who oppose abortion.

Sometimes when anti-abortion activists reach for press-bashing ammunition they point out that most major newspapers support abortion rights on their

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editorial pages. However, this is not an especially troublesome indicator because the people who decide editorial policy and those who report the news are organizationally separated in all newspapers. And often news people pride themselves on disagreeing with some of their newspaper's editorial positions.

More potent press-bashing ammunition can be found in the fact that some reporters participated in a big abortion-rights march in Washington a few years ago. Also, the American Newspaper Guild, the union that represents news and editorial employees at many major newspapers, has officially endorsed "freedom of choice in abortion decisions."

In any case, the abortion-rights bias and the quest for fairness constitute an important burden for many journalists.

### The Extremes Versus Reality

A second important burden arises from the news-reporting convention that prompts many journalists to cover only the two extremes when they write about the national abortion debate.

In part, this inclination is prompted by the fact that activists from the two extreme camps often are the subjects of spot-news occurrences. For instance, when abortion opponents show up to demonstrate at an abortion clinic and are confronted by abortion-

rights activists, the reporter typically talks with representatives of each side and possibly to police on the scene. If the resulting story is accurate and balanced, sound reporting results. But when a reporter writes about the abortion debate from a broader perspective, it can be a mistake to portray it as a two-sided discussion. The vast majority of Americans do not fully agree with the activists at either extreme.

"Few Americans have both feet in either camp," concluded University of Michigan researchers Steven Rosenstone and Maria Calvo when analyzing the university's extensive survey of the 1988 electorate. They found that only 17 percent had completely "pure" positions for abortion rights, and only 21 percent had completely "pure" anti-abortion positions. According to a *Wall Street Journal* article, the Michigan findings were similar to those of other media polls: almost two out of five felt that abortion should never be permitted or should be only if there had been rape, incest or a danger to the woman's life. One in five believed abortion should be allowed in other cases "after the need has been clearly established," while the remaining 40 percent said a woman should always be able to get an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

Better than two-thirds of the entire group—regardless of their general position on abortion—supported state laws requiring parents to be notified before a daughter under eighteen could get an abortion. However, more than 56 percent opposed state laws barring the use of public funds for abortion.

In addition, consider that more than half of those saying a woman has an absolute right to an abortion also expressed support for parental notification laws, and almost one-third favored laws that would ban public spending on abortion. Yet more than one-third of the "never" group opposed any ban on public funding of abortions.

I have found less complex indications of related attitudes in my own experience. A few summers ago when abortion demonstrations prompted heated clashes in Wichita, Kansas, I often heard Wichitans bemoan the shrillness of activists on both sides. Sometimes the press was spattered by the anti-shrillness complaints. These seemed additional indications that many Americans often don't find their own views represented in coverage of the abortion debate. And that creates another important burden for the well-meaning journalist.

### **The Distortions of Stereotyping**

Journalists are regularly limited by time and space. Usually there is an impending deadline and some kind of length constraint for each news story.

What is more, journalists realize that most readers and viewers also have limited time and attention spans. These factors drive the journalist to seek ways to simplify complex situations. But such quests can easily lead to the distortions of stereotyping. And such stereotypes tend to reflect the abortion-rights bias of many journalists.

David Shaw, the Pulitzer Prize winning reporter

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who covers the media for the *Los Angeles Times*, spent eighteen months studying journalism practices in covering the abortion debate. After interviewing more than 100 journalists and abortion-debate activists, Shaw concluded that abortion opponents often are described as "conservatives." But abortion-rights supporters rarely are labeled "liberals," Shaw learned.

Similarly, Shaw's study showed that abortion opponents sometimes are identified as Catholics or fundamentalist Christians, even when their religion is not demonstrably relevant to a given story. But abortion-rights advocates rarely are identified by religion.

Shaw also found that abortion opponents often are described as "militant" or "strident." But such characterizations are seldom used to describe abortion-rights advocates, "many of whom can also be militant or strident—or both," Shaw reported.

Stereotyping sometimes becomes a factor in whom journalists seek out as sources as well as in how they describe the sources. For instance, national newspapers and broadcast networks often seek out Faye Wattleton, the calm, attractive president of Planned Parenthood of America, to speak for the abortion-rights point of view. She often is paired with Randall Terry, a born-again Christian who likes to brandish a dead fetus in a tiny coffin and who founded Operation Rescue, which tries to blockade abortion clinics.

*Time* magazine headlined its profile of Ms. Wattleton "Nothing Less Than Perfect" and said she was "self-possessed, imperturbable, smoothly articulate," "imperially slim and sleekly dressed . . . a

stunning refutation of the cliché of the dowdy feminist." The *New York Times Magazine's* cover story on her said she was "relentlessly high-minded," "telegenic," "immaculately tailored," "a striking six-footer with an aristocratic bearing," "a tough, shrewd operator" and said, "Calmly, rationally, every hair in place, she will lead the faithful into battle. . . ."

In contrast, the Associated Press, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*, among many others, have described Randall Terry as a former used-car salesman. That description suggests something "a little unscrupulous . . . not quite trustworthy," says Eileen McNamara, a veteran of abortion coverage for the *Boston Globe*. Ms. McNamara, who acknowledges having used the "used car dealer" phrase herself, says that she believes most reporters strive to be fair but that most support abortion rights, and "I think we were delighted to find out that he sold used cars."

Jack Rosenthal, editor of the *New York Times Magazine*, argues that not all the blame for such comparisons can be put on journalists. He suggests that the intimidating tactics used by Operation Rescue "traverse any kind of civility and go beyond the limits of reasonable discourse" and thus Mr. Terry brings upon himself some of the unkind characterizations.

In his *Los Angeles Times* article on abortion news coverage, David Shaw quoted veteran abortion-story reporters from the *Boston Globe* and *Washington Post*, saying they have "come to realize that there are intelligent, rational, sincere people on both sides of what is an extraordinarily complex issue." Mirianne Rea-Luthin, president of the Value of Life Committee of Boston, says, "Reporters often say to me, 'Gee, you're reasonable,' as if all pro-life people are unreasonable."

Such episodes and observations underscore the ease with which stereotypes can creep into the coverage of this national story and rob the stories of fairness and accuracy.

### Progress Made and Credibility Lost

Many critics have acknowledged that there has been recent improvement in the coverage of American abortion politics.

Especially evident is that some major news organizations have begun to sort out how to make value-free references to activist groups in the abortion debate. For years, one side was known as pro-choice and the other as anti-abortion. (As noted earlier, the important groups in the middle were rarely acknowledged and never labeled.)

However, the "anti-abortion" groups wanted to be labeled "pro-life," arguing that being labeled "anti" anything was a handicap. Those groups also argued that "pro-choice" was a distortion because it characterized the mother's choice but ignored the choice the baby might make to live. This notion triggered heated arguments about whether the fetus was indeed a baby who could make a choice. And amid such turmoil journalists wrestled with terms that reasonable people on both sides might consider acceptable. The emerging terms are "abortion-rights advocates" and "supporters of legal abortion" for the old "pro-choice" label. And while "anti-abortion" still is acceptable in most news organizations, some are moving toward "opponents of abortion."

There also has been more coverage in recent months acknowledging the large and important group of Americans whose views lie somewhere between the extremes of this national discussion. And some progress is being made in the battle against knee-jerk stereotyping. Even some of the loudest critics of past practices are recognizing the progress. When the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* published a major story on abortions in the latter stages of pregnancy, Susan Carpenter-McMillan, media spokeswoman for the Right to Life League of Southern California, called it "the most unbiased thing I've ever seen, the best thing the *Los Angeles Times* has ever done (on abortion)."

Progress has been slow and sometimes painful, but American journalists are finally learning to cover this complex story more even-handedly.

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