
Fairness Versus Objectivity in Reporting on the Abortion Controversy

by Carole Rich

From word choice to placement of a story in a newspaper or television newscast, reporting about abortion creates a multitude of ethical dilemmas for the media. What should advocates and opponents of abortion be called? Can journalists have rights as private citizens to express their views about abortion when they are not reporting a story about the subject? These are just a few concerns facing the media. Central to the issue is whether journalists can or should be objective when covering abortion. Total objectivity could prevent journalists from exercising their role as watchdogs for the public. Rather than objectivity, the goal of journalists should be fairness in covering this sensitive subject.

The question of how to cover the abortion debate raises many ethical dilemmas for journalists, especially that of whether or not it is possible for journalists to be objective in their reporting on this topic.

Earlier this year when 35,000 people marched in Washington on the 21st anniversary of the 1973 Supreme Court decision affirming the constitutional right to abortion, the *New York Times* called it a "poor turnout" and a "tepid reprise of rallies past."¹ Was this fair coverage? Was it objective? In this case, probably not. The article contained only two paragraphs explaining the marchers' views; the other six paragraphs gave a negative spin to the event.

Concerns about fairness and objectivity weigh heavily on the media and with good reason. Even if journalists make every effort to be fair in their coverage of an abortion story, readers bring their own biases to the story. The same story read by people on different sides of the abortion debate will be perceived differently, often with both sides claiming bias.

However, criticism that media coverage favors supporters of legal abortion is well founded. *Los Angeles Times* media critic, David Shaw, concluded in a study a few years ago that the media did show bias favoring abortion rights advocates in content of stories, tone, choice of language or prominence of play.² Shaw's study was based on abortion coverage in major newspapers, television newscasts and news magazines over an 18-month period plus interviews with more than 100 journalists and activists in the abortion debate.

For example, Shaw said abortion-rights are often quoted more frequently, and columns of commentary favoring abortion outnumber those opposing abortion by a margin of more than two-to-one on the editorial pages.³

Unlike stories on the editorial pages where writers may express their opinions, stories on the news pages are supposed to be "objective." Objectivity is generally interpreted in the media to mean that journalists are expected to keep their own thoughts, feelings and biases out of news accounts.

The Society for Professional Journalists states in its code of ethics that "Truth is our ultimate goal. Objectivity in reporting the news is another goal that serves as the mark of an experienced professional. It is a standard of performance toward which we strive."

But should it be?

It is naive to believe that journalists can be objective. From the minute they cover a story, they select information to quote and use in their stories. But that does not mean the story will be unfair. It is as foolish to insist that a journalist be neutral about abortion as it is to ask a reporter to be neutral about rape or murder. Surely few journalists would be in

Carole Rich is associate professor at the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas. She was a reporter and editor at three major metropolitan newspapers and is the author of a textbook, Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method.

favor of such crimes, but they can still cover stories about them fairly.

On the other hand, journalists who publicly express their opinions about abortion at rallies could

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cause the news organization they represent a credibility problem, particularly in broadcast news where reporters are more visible.

"The job of the journalist is to report the facts, not to create them," writes Elliot D. Cohen, author of a media ethics book. "So understood, however, there are several philosophical questions that arise. In the first place, to what extent is it possible for journalists, or human beings generally, to transcend their own subjectivity in accounting for the facts? . . . And if journalistic objectivity is attainable, is it something journalists *ought* to pursue?"⁴

If journalists are merely purveyors of facts and not interpreters, news stories would lack context, balance and even accuracy. Reporting the facts of an event without interpreting context and accuracy can conflict with the journalist's moral responsibility to be a watchdog for the public. It is a fact that a source said something. It may not be a fact that it is true.

Consider this incident: Throughout the summer of 1991 protesters demonstrated outside the entrance of an abortion clinic in Wichita, Kansas. At one press conference, a leader of Operation Rescue, a group opposing abortion, pulled a fully formed dead fetus from a bottle and claimed that it had been a late-term abortion.

Steven A. Smith, who was managing editor of the *Wichita Eagle* at that time, said the situation posed a difficult dilemma for the newspaper. The event was news, but there was no evidence that the fetus had been aborted at the Wichita clinic. So the problem was whether to include the information, and if so, where and how to use it. Smith said he was convinced the situation was staged to manipulate the press. However, the paper used the information in a story with the context that there was no proof the fetus was aborted at the Wichita clinic; furthermore,

the paper did not run a photograph of the fetus. The local television stations also refused to show the fetus.⁵ Had the media simply reported the facts without questioning the accuracy and context, they might have been considered objective but could they have been considered morally responsible?

That summer-long protest posed other ethical dilemmas as well for the *Wichita Eagle*. So concerned was the newspaper about fairness and balanced coverage for both sides of the abortion protest that at one point a copy editor measured the news stories to determine how much print each group favoring and opposed to abortion received in each story. Clearly, to measure fairness in inches is an absurdity. If one group creates the news, fairness demands that the story reflects that group's actions. Although journalists should seek a balanced point of view from the other side of the issue so that citizens can be informed, the story does not have to give both sides equal amounts of space.

Staff members at the *Eagle* also were directed to avoid participating in or even observing the abortion protests to prevent the newspaper from the appearance of bias, which is another major ethical dilemma for the media posed by the abortion debate. It raises questions of when, if ever, can reporters have the rights of private citizens? Should they not vote if they cover politics? Should they not attend their children's PTA meetings if they cover education? Should they not attend church if they cover religion? The general guideline at most television stations and newspapers is that reporters can exercise personal rights in events and issues as long as they are not covering sources or beats related to those issues.

But the fact remains that reporters will still have opinions, whether they express them publicly or not. Professional journalists know how to be fair despite their personal views.

Theodore L. Glasser, a Stanford University professor who teaches media ethics, strongly opposes the concept of objectivity for reporters. "Objective reporting is biased against what the press typically defines as its role in a democracy—that of a Fourth Estate, the watchdog role, an adversary press. . . . Objectivity in journalism effectively erodes the very foundation on which rests a responsible press. . . . And most of all, objective reporting has denied journalists their citizenship; as disinterested observers, as impartial reporters, journalists are expected to be morally disengaged and politically inactive."⁶

Another barometer of bias is word choice. The media often label people who support the Supreme Court's decision as "pro-choice advocates," while

those who oppose it are often referred to as "anti-abortion protestors" or "abortion foes." Activists in the latter category prefer the term "pro-life." They claim that the other terms are loaded with negative context because "anti" means against and "pro" gives a positive image.

In 1993 the *Los Angeles Times* revised its stylebook and prohibited use of the terms "pro-choice" and "pro-life." In their place the newspaper ruled that writers should use the terms "pro-abortion," "anti-abortion" and "abortion foe" to foster clarity and accuracy.⁷

The issue may not always be *how* to cover abortion but *whether* to cover it. As gatekeepers, editors must decide when abortion is newsworthy. Is abortion only a news story when it involves violence and confrontation?

An examination of stories about abortion in five major metropolitan newspapers during 1992-93 revealed a total of more than 3,500 stories, many of them thoughtful and balanced reports of legal, moral and emotional issues. But those receiving front-page placement were often about violence. It is easy to blame the messenger. However, when a doctor who performs abortions is killed and another doctor is shot—the same Wichita doctor whose clinic was the target of summer-long protests in 1992—that is front-page news. Conflict is a key element of newsworthiness.

Regardless of word choice, story placement or content, it is unlikely that the media will be considered totally fair in their coverage of abortion. The issue is too emotionally charged to be viewed dispassionately by the public. It is also unrealistic to expect journalists to be objective when covering this topic. Rather than objectivity, the goal of journalists

should be to provide the public with context, varying points of view and accuracy in abortion news and in any other news stories. Journalists should be aware of their own biases so they can examine whether they are truly being fair. The journalist's

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mission in covering abortion should not be to make decisions for the public but to provide the kind of information that allows the public to make its own decisions. If they succeed in doing that, journalists may not be considered objective, but at least they can be considered responsible.

References

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