

Abortion-Politics and the Print Media in Mexico

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Abstract

A free press has risen in Mexico, increasing the legitimacy of print media as a source of objective information on abortion. Using a sample of 100 newspaper articles from five Mexico City newspapers containing the word “abortion,” this study examines the context in which abortion is discussed in the media and the social actors that are associated with pro-choice, anti-abortion and mixed arguments. Results show non-governmental organizations and Catholic Church representatives as the principal social actors, with coverage also given to political leaders who vocalize their position toward liberalization of abortion laws. Most articles present only one viewpoint when covering abortion, dominated by organizations and leaders who represent the opposite sides of the debate. This study highlights a range of issues surrounding abortion that appear in the Mexican press, providing a reflection of the climate in which the abortion debate exists.

Introduction

Abortion in Mexico is widespread despite restrictive laws that limit its legal practice (GIRE, 2005; Kendrick, 2003; Lara *et al.*, 2003). Maternal mortality due to unsafe abortions is a public health concern and has led to an intense debate around the issue, as well as calls for liberalization of abortion laws and increased education about abortion (Lafaurie, *et al.*, 2005; WHO, 2003). One source of education is the print media, which has significant readership throughout Mexico and thus the potential to influence the abortion debate and impact policy changes. Furthermore, a free press has risen in Mexico in the past two decades, increasing the legitimacy of print media as a source of objective information on abortion (Hughes, 2006; Lawson, 2002). This study examines the context in which abortion is discussed in five Mexico City newspapers and the social actors that are associated with pro-choice, anti-abortion and mixed arguments who are given press coverage in the debate. An understanding of how abortion is portrayed in the Mexican press will help inform further interventions which rely on the print media in order to publicize messages, influence the abortion debate and, ultimately, enact changes in abortion policy.

Background

Abortion is a global public health concern, particularly in countries that prohibit it by law (WHO, 2003). In Mexico, abortion laws are restrictive, and only when a woman becomes pregnant as the result of rape is abortion legal in all states (GIRE, 2005). Nevertheless, between 850,000 and 1.5 million abortions are practiced each year in the country (Kendrick, 2003). Abortion is the leading cause of hospitalization due to pregnancy complications in Mexico, as well as the third leading cause of maternal

mortality (Lara *et al.*, 2003). Political debate surrounding abortion in Mexico plays out between the conservative National Action Party (PAN), which has a strict anti-abortion platform, and the leftist Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), whose platform includes the “decriminalization of abortion in support of voluntary motherhood” (Lamas & Bissell, 2000). From the 1930s until 2000 the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) controlled the government and did not take a firm stance on abortion. However, the PAN has held the presidency since 2000, and its party members consistently support the anti-abortion movement (Lamas & Bissell, 2000). With the exception of a law passed in the PRD-governed Mexico City in 2000—legalizing abortion in the cases of rape, when fetal abnormalities were present and nonconsensual artificial insemination—legislative efforts to liberalize abortion laws have rarely proven successful in the past six years (Kendrick, 2003).

Abortion law in Mexico is determined at the state level, and the only condition under which abortion is legal throughout Mexico’s 31 states and the Federal District is when a woman’s pregnancy resulted from rape. Abortion is legal when a woman’s life is in danger in 29 states, and in 13 states when there are genetic or congenital malformations in the fetus. Ten states permit legal abortion when a pregnancy presents grave danger to a woman’s health (GIRE, 2005). In all cases, at least two medical specialists must be consulted. Yucatan is the only state in which abortion is legal for economic reasons, and in that case a woman must already have three children and be able to prove that she lacks the economic resources to support an additional child (Lara *et al.*, 2003). Penalties for women who abort, as well as for those who help them do so, range from six months to five years of imprisonment (Kendrick, 2003).

In the past decade, various individual cases involving abortion received considerable media attention. Among those, the Paulina case in 1999 received the most coverage (Taracena, 2002). At age 13, Paulina became pregnant as the result of rape and received official approval to undergo a legal abortion. However, doctors in the Baja California public hospital where she was admitted were unwilling to perform the abortion (Lara *et al.*, 2003). Influenced by visits from anti-abortion representatives, as well as by hospital officials who exaggerated the risks of abortion, Paulina reluctantly chose to carry her child to term. Media coverage of the case was unprecedented, and public support overwhelmingly favored Paulina and her right to an abortion as a rape victim. This further contributed to public outrage in 2000 when the PAN-led government in the state of Guanajuato passed an amendment to outlaw abortion in the case of rape. Faced with pressure manifested in national newspapers, press conferences and opinion polls, the governor of Guanajuato decided to veto the bill (Lamas & Bissell, 2000). Both the Paulina and Guanajuato cases demonstrate the role that public opinion, fanned by press attention, can play in the shaping of abortion policy.

The various effects of media on health attitudes and behaviors and, more specifically, reproductive health policy, are well documented (Barakso & Schaffner, 2006; Pruitt & Mullen, 2005; Stephenson & Lee, 2003; Taracena, 2002; Dutilh Novaes, 2000; Patterson & Hall, 1998; Terkildsen *et al.*, 1998; Olasky & Olasky, 1986). While media coverage of an issue can affect public perception of that issue, the media also plays a more passive role in that it must focus on the issues that most interest news consumers. Thus, the news both shapes and reflects the public agenda (Perse *et al.*, 1997).

Studies find that the media is powerful because it “tells people what to think about and how to think” (Stephenson & Lee, 2003). The way in which media selects and interprets political and social events both informs and motivates the public (Westoff & Rodriguez, 1995). A study on perceptions of induced abortion in Brazil argued that mass media has a significant influence on public opinion regarding abortion in that country (Dutilh Novaes, 2000). What is published, as well as how that information is presented, establishes a context for social, political and cultural movements. In the United States, a study of the mass media found that the press set the overall tone for abortion messages received by the public, thereby shaping public discourse (Terkildsen *et al.*, 1998). Given the media’s role in determining how social movements are presented to the public, studies have concluded that the media is a critical component in the success of those movements (Barakso & Schaffner, 2006; Terkildsen *et al.*, 1998). Because of its power to interpret the performance of political actors and shape the presentation of events to the public, the media has been called the “uncredited director of policy” (Terkildsen *et al.*, 1998). Media coverage of issues moves them higher on the political agenda and serves as an important resource for interest groups seeking policy change (Otten, 1992).

Compared to broadcast media, the print media in Mexico moved faster toward independence during the democratization of the press in the 1990s. Newspapers are still considered to be more independent than other media forms in Mexico, which are often criticized for having an overly sensationalist focus (Lawson, 2002; Johnson, 2006). Only 10-15% of Mexicans report that their news comes primarily from newspapers (Lawson, 2002). However, the print media is read primarily by the Mexican elite, including opinion leaders and political decision makers, theoretically making its influence disproportionate

to its readership (Lawson, 2002). Through an examination of abortion coverage in five Mexico City newspapers, this study will determine the context in which abortion is presented to the public and provide a better understanding of this potentially influential source in shaping abortion policy.

Data and Methods

Five newspapers based in Mexico City (*El Universal*, *La Jornada*, *Reforma*, *La Prensa* and *El Sol de México*) were selected to represent political ideologies on the left (*La Jornada*), right (*La Prensa*), center-left (*El Sol de México*), center-right (*Reforma*) and center (*El Universal*). Between January 2001 and December 2003, articles which contained the word “abortion” either in the title or in the body of the article were collected from daily hard copy editions of each newspaper. A total of 600 articles were collected retrospectively from a data base compiled by the Group for Information on Elective Reproduction (GIRE), from which 100 were randomly sampled for analysis. Once selected, hard copies were found at either the GIRE headquarters or at university libraries in Mexico City. The final sample included 27 articles from *Reforma*, 24 from *La Jornada*, 21 from *El Sol de México*, 17 from *El Universal* and 11 from *La Prensa*.

Article content was analyzed using MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. Articles were coded, and the main themes arising were identified and compared to determine the context in which abortion is portrayed in the print media, including how abortion is framed by other issues, abortion and maternal mortality statistics, the representation of abortion-related events, government actors, abortion legislation, and

discussion of the abortion debate. Finally, key pro-choice, anti-abortion and mixed/neutral messages and actors were identified.

For the purpose of this analysis, the term pro-choice will refer to those who support abortion in all cases, and the term anti-abortion will refer to those who oppose abortion in all cases. Mixed opinion refers to those who support abortion in some cases, such as when a woman's life is in danger or a pregnancy is the result of rape. Articles classified as pro-choice disproportionately covered events and actors that favored either complete decriminalization of abortion or further liberalization of abortion laws. Articles classified as anti-abortion disproportionately covered events and actors that opposed abortion in all cases or favored further legal restrictions on the practice of abortion. Mixed articles contained coverage of both pro-choice and anti-abortion viewpoints. Neutral articles contained no opinions and primarily covered abortion statistics.

Results

Of the 100 articles, 38 were classified as covering primarily the pro-choice side of the abortion debate, and 25 covered primarily the anti-abortion side of the debate. The rest of the articles were divided between mixed (n=15 articles) and neutral (n=22 articles) categories. Table 1 shows how articles were classified according to the newspaper in which they appeared. Although there were no clear patterns of pro-choice or anti-abortion coverage across newspapers, both *El Universal* and *Reforma* showed the greatest number of articles in the mixed and neutral categories. In contrast, the number of articles in the mixed and neutral categories for *La Jornada*, *La Prensa*, and *El Sol de México* was lower.

Newspaper	Pro	Anti	Mixed	Neutral	Total
<i>El Universal</i>	7	2	2	6	17
<i>La Jornada</i>	11	8	3	2	24
<i>Reforma</i>	6	6	8	7	27
<i>La Prensa</i>	4	4	0	3	11
<i>El Sol de México</i>	10	5	2	4	21
Total	38	25	15	22	100

The majority of articles were classified as news (n=86), while there were 13 op-eds and one letter to the editor. Of the op-eds, six reflected mixed or neutral opinions toward abortion. Five op-eds were classified as pro-choice, and two were classified as anti-abortion. In the sample, *La Reforma* published the most op-eds (n=6), three of which were mixed or neutral, and two of which were pro-choice.

Framing of abortion in the press

Abortion was often reported in the context of other controversial issues. Anti-abortion groups especially framed abortion in the context of other topics they opposed on a moral basis. The issue most commonly mentioned alongside abortion was same-sex marriage, stressed by the Catholic Church as a comparable example of immorality.

Condemnation of abortion in the context of other issues opposed by the Church was common.

“The bishop of Querétaro, Mario de Gasperín, insists that Catholics do not vote this July 6 for parties or candidates that are in favor of abortion, euthanasia, manipulation of embryos, prostitution, homosexual marriage, physical and chemical contraception, pornography, human cloning and social crimes like drug trafficking, alcoholism and ethnic or racial discrimination.” La Jornada

“In his homily, [Bishop Martínez Zepeda] warned that the Catholic Church is not unaware of the changes in the country and will not be able to keep silent about the acts

and political tendencies that seek legal reforms, referring to the themes of abortion and homosexual unions.” Reforma

In contrast, articles covering pro-choice groups placed abortion in the context of the women’s rights movement. Articles emphasized a concern among pro-choice leaders that Mexico’s restrictive abortion laws are indicative of a sexist culture that does not allow women to be equal to men.

“Espinosa emphasized that the [National Women’s Institute] has as its most ambitious objective to achieve a ‘cultural change’ and break the ‘paradigms’ of a society that has maintained the inequality of opportunities and economic and social conditions for women.” La Jornada

Reporting of Abortion Statistics

The reporting of abortion statistics was found primarily in neutral articles that covered various studies commissioned by both the pro-choice and anti-abortion coalitions. Most statistics cited in newspaper articles referred to the number of abortions performed each year in Mexico, the percentage of those abortions that occur in clandestine settings, and the number of deaths that result from complications due to unsafe abortions.

“The academic from the Institute of Philosophical Investigations, Margarita Valdés Villarreal, stated that according to various studies each year an average of 500 thousand abortions are practiced. According to the most conservative statistics, from 200 thousand to 250 thousand [are practiced] in the same period, and according to the progressives up to one million...annually there are between 8 thousand and 16 thousand deaths.” El Sol de México

The statistics that appear in articles come primarily from studies commissioned by universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and commissioned studies, although the Church has also become involved in the generation of abortion-related data.

“The Catholic Church praised the work of Pro-Life yesterday in a ceremony for the 25th anniversary of the organization. Cardinal Norberto Rivera...praised the work that the foundation has done to prevent the deaths of 34,549 unborn children.” La Jornada (091)

The primary concern expressed in newspaper articles was maternal morbidity and mortality resulting from complications due to unsafe abortions. Articles covered reactions to abortion statistics, as well as the use of maternal mortality data by the pro-choice movement as a way to argue for the complete decriminalization of abortion. An article in *El Sol de México* covered an initiative to decriminalize abortion by Norma Gutierrez de la Torre of the PRI party.

“We know that the theme generates a diversity of opinions and goes against customs, ideas and dogma, but despite the diverse pressures that this gives, we cannot deny the existence of the problem. We cannot close our eyes and permit women to continue dying from undergoing abortions in conditions that put at risk their health and life.” El Sol de México

Other articles focused on abortion’s specific contribution to maternal mortality, reporting that complications from unsafe abortions resulted in approximately “6000 deaths each year in Latin America” (*La Jornada*). One article reported that abortion was the third most common cause of maternal mortality in the northern state of Chihuahua. Along with concerns over maternal mortality came a recognition of economic inequality because wealthy women are less likely to resort to unsafe abortions. A researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) highlighted this problem:

“The criminalization of abortion generates major problems of social justice and public health, in that women with economic resources who decide to abort do it in better conditions; this does not happen with poor women who increase mortality and morbidity statistics, generating high costs for attention in public hospitals.” El Sol de México

Coverage of Abortion-Related Events

One way the abortion debate arose in the articles was in the reporting of abortion-related events. Newspapers covered events that were concentrated on either pro-choice or anti-abortion viewpoints, although there were also some events that focused on opening a

dialogue around the topic of abortion. Two newspapers covered the forum on *Ethical and Legal Aspects of Abortion: Debating Decriminalization*, as well as the Pro-Life Group's protest staged outside the event. The event that received the most newspaper coverage was a march in the central square of Mexico City in honor of the *Day for the Decriminalization of Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean*.

"In commemoration of the Day for the Decriminalization of Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean, that is celebrated on September 28, the organization Catholics for the Right to Choose vowed to defend the lay State and the separation of Church and State, and affirmed that despite major advances in the fight for the right to a legal and safe abortion—which is the case of the Federal District with the application of the Ley Robles—the challenges are immense." *La Jornada*

Coverage of anti-abortion events included the *Day of the Unborn* to commemorate those who were aborted, in addition to a forum on *The Herods of the New Century: Violence and Infant Mistreatment*. *La Jornada* covered the 25th anniversary of the Pro-Life Group in which the Church congratulated the organization for "fostering a culture of life." *Reforma* published two separate reports on the opening of *Punto y Aparte*, a film aimed at dissuading women from having abortions. Conferences organized by anti-abortion groups also received coverage.

"From May 5-9 will convene the Continental Meeting of National Commissions of the Pastoral Family 'for a culture of life' in Toluca, state of Mexico where topics will be discussed that according to the bishop of Queretaro go against the Catholic religion." *La Jornada*

Newspapers also covered individual abortion cases, most of which focused on narratives of women who tried to obtain legal abortions under state laws that permit abortion when a pregnancy is the result of rape. The case of Paulina Ramírez appeared once in the sample of articles. The only case mentioned in more than one newspaper was

that of a young girl in Nicaragua who was denied an abortion by Nicaraguan authorities in 2003. *La Prensa* covered reaction from pro-choice groups.

“The Mexican civil association Catholics for the Right to Choose submitted a letter to the Nicaraguan embassy in Mexico, directed to President Enrique Bolanos Geyer and Archbishop Miguel Ovando, in which they expressed their disgust at the discrimination and excommunication to which they have subjected Rosa, the 9 year old girl who, after being raped, became pregnant and later had an abortion.” La Prensa

Government, Legislation, and the Abortion Debate

Government agencies were generally cited in articles that focused on abortion statistics. The National Council on Population provided abortion incidence data, and the Commission for Gender and Equality was cited in reference to maternal mortality due to abortion. *El Sol de México* reported figures obtained from the Mexican Institute of Social Security in an article about adolescent pregnancy.

“...of every hundred women of 15 to 19 years, ten have an abortion, which is generally practiced in inadequate conditions, causing bleeding and infections that can lead to death.” El Sol de México

Although most government officials remained neutral concerning their attitudes toward the abortion debate, some directors of government organizations were quoted when they took sides in the debate. *Reforma* covered the pro-choice comments of Gerardo Laveaga, the director of Mexico’s National Institute of Criminal Sciences (INACIPE) with the headline, *“INACIPE Gives Support to Induced Abortion,”* and an article that included a quote from Laveaga:

“It is necessary to debate more about the cases where circumstances lead the woman to have an abortion. To start, we should permit women with scarce resources to do it if they desire and the State backs them. It is sad to see how they end up piercing the uterus or cause themselves pain in order to abort. This should be seen from the perspective in which it is a personal decision.” Gerardo Laveaga, Reforma

Legislative coverage focused primarily on the *Ley Robles*—enacted in 2000—and the Supreme Court’s upholding of the law as constitutional amid legal challenges by the PAN and other conservative parties.

“[As] Chief of Government of the Federal District [from] 1999-2000, Robles...obtained the approval of a law that decriminalized abortion in cases of malformation of the fetus, cases of rape and when the life of the mother is at risk.” Reforma

Other coverage consisted of various initiatives introduced by members of the PRI and PRD to further liberalize abortion laws, as well as reports on current laws. The leftist PMP and PRD parties used legislative sessions as forums through which to denounce Church involvement in politics. In addition, legislators in the Federal District passed a law that increased penalties for providers who force women to have abortions.

“During the regular session of the Legislative Assembly of the Federal District, on the issue of abortion...the PRD and PAN established that there will be at least five to eight years of prison for a person who practices abortion without the consent of the woman and from eight to ten years if there is physical or moral violence in order to impose the practice [of abortion].” El Universal

Newspapers also covered discussion of the abortion debate in general. Leaders on all sides of the debate discussed whether to define abortion as a social justice or public health issue. In addition, some argued over who should have a say in the drafting of abortion laws—women, doctors, lawyers or legislators. While some leading figures spoke of the need to bring the topic into the open, others argued that debate was unnecessary. A sign at a protest against the forum Ethical and Legal Aspects of Abortion: Debating Decriminalization, read, *“...the right to life is not debated. It is respected!” (La Jornada)*. This sentiment was opposed in coverage of the pro-choice NGO, Catholics for the Right to Choose.

“Joined together in the capital Zócalo as an act of solidarity with ‘the thousands of women who have died due to unsafe abortions,’ they affirmed that Catholics ‘do not live

to suffer nor to carry the blame or repent for the conscientious decisions that we make' and reiterated that their intention is not to obligate anyone to have an abortion, but rather to create conditions to open a debate, 'far from prejudice and criticism.'" La Jornada

In recognition of the “clash of absolutes” surrounding the topic of abortion, an op-ed in *Reforma* further discussed the principle arguments on both sides of the abortion debate, as well as the merits of opening a dialogue around the polarizing issue.

“In the superficial discussion of the issue, the extremes appear irreconcilable and polemics inevitable. But going into more depth in the arguments of pro-abortionists and anti-abortionists is necessary to eliminate the absolutisms and open a space for the acceptability of some elements of each of the two positions that could perhaps permit the formulation of an intermediate proposal and, in a certain way, reconciliation.” Alfonso Ruiz Miguel, *Reforma* op-ed

Pro-Choice Messages and Actors

Pro-choice messages appearing in newspapers focused both on a woman’s right to make decisions about her own body and the large number of maternal deaths due to complications from abortion. One article covered the topic of abortion legalization as an indicator of a modernizing society, such as in Europe, where even predominantly Catholic countries have liberal abortion laws. According to one representative of the Evangelical Church in Mexico,

“‘[The decision to abort] is not about the rights or responsibility of third parties, but of [the women] themselves.’” El Universal

“With the exception of Ireland and Poland, which have some restrictions, actually all the women of the countries of Europe have the right to a safe and legal abortion. This situation contrasts with our conservative and evangelized region of America...” Gabriela Rodriguez, *La Jornada* op-ed

In addition, one pro-choice advocate argued that the decision to have an abortion is difficult for the woman, and she should be well informed of the risks involved.

“‘Abortion is not considered by women as a method of family planning, least of all in a country like Mexico,’ affirmed Julia Chavez Carapia, coordinator of the Center for

Women's Studies of the National School for Social Work at the UNAM. Therefore she pronounced herself in favor of the decriminalization of abortion, since in any case thousands are performed daily, but in a clandestine manner and in unhealthy conditions that only bring about death and health complications in the majority of women." La Prensa

"Better knowledge about abortion stops it from being considered as a sin, but as the right of the woman to decide about her body." Julia Chávez Carapia, El Sol de México

In addition to pro-choice arguments, coverage of abortion advocates also included their protests against involvement of the Catholic Church in electoral politics. Patricia Mercado and the Mexico Possible Party's (PMP) attempts to obtain an official injunction against the Church, as well as other condemnation of Church involvement in politics, received coverage in several newspapers.

"Patricia Mercado...asserted yesterday that the Catholic Church hierarchy should not decide which parties exist nor what they offer politically. That, she said, is decided by votes." Reforma

"For immersing itself in electoral affairs to demand that Catholics of Querétaro not vote for 'a party that is against the absolute respect of human life,' the [PMP] presented to the Special Group for Attention to Electoral Crimes...a denouncement against Querétaro bishop Mario de Gasparín." El Sol de México

NGOs and their leaders stood out as the most prominent pro-choice figures in newspaper coverage. NGOs such as Catholics for the Right to Choose, the Group for Information on Elective Reproduction (GIRE) and Feminist Millennium organized events and publicized studies on abortion incidence and opinion. *La Jornada* covered a protest in Mexico City led by María Consuelo Mejía, director of Catholics for the Right to Choose, who criticized the Church's anti-abortion arguments.

"She added that the request to the Catholic hierarchy is that it open a space for dialogue and 'listen with humanity and compassion to what happens in the lives of women,' because we see with worry, she said, a growing distance between the moral teachings of the Church and the daily lives of people." La Jornada

Politicians and their respective political parties were also featured in newspaper coverage of abortion. Most politicians focused on arguing for the liberalization of abortion laws as opposed to decriminalization of abortion in all cases. While the PRD argued that abortion laws must be liberalized to prevent maternal mortality, both the PRI and PMP proposed initiatives that would completely decriminalize abortion in the Federal District.

“The PMP will drive legislative methods to ‘contribute to the eradication of sexism and machismo in our country.’ In its legislative platform it will argue that the fourth constitutional article contain the decriminalization of abortion...” El Universal

Anti-Abortion Messages and Actors

Anti-abortion messages in newspapers were presented primarily by leaders in the Catholic Church. Arguments included the Catholic principle that life begins at conception, as well as calling for the defense of innocents. According to the Church, decisions regarding abortion should not be based on public opinion surveys, but rather on moral grounds. Anti-abortion leaders referred to abortion as murder, genocide, and a massacre of innocent human beings. Others pointed to the constitutional right to life and warned of the negative physical and psychological consequences to a woman who chooses to abort. An article in *La Jornada* described an Apostolic Announcement made by Giuseppe Bertello:

“In our days a culture of death is being breathed, where under dark criteria and complete lack of truth the value of this right [to life] is intended to be conditional.’ He asked that despite opposition and persecution, the ‘joy and happiness to have collaborated in favor of life so threatened of the most weak, in those innocents who cannot defend themselves and whose silent screams many do not want to hear’ predominate.” La Jornada

Coverage by *La Prensa* of a Church sermon included the cardinal’s demonization of pro-choice advocates, whom he viewed as equivalents to the leader of a biblical massacre.

“Cardinal Rivera Carrera specified that the local legislators who promote laws to murder innocents are the actual Herods. He indicated that the life of a human being begins at conception until death and those who want to decriminalize abortion are without doubt the true Herods of our era.” La Prensa

The Church used both religious and political platforms to proclaim its resistance to all initiatives that would liberalize abortion laws. Through apostolic announcements, voting handbooks, sermons and press releases, its leaders continually called on their constituents to vote against any political party or figure that supported abortion.

“In a discussion with the Danish ambassador, the Pope affirmed that ‘a vision of a Europe separate from God can only lead to social fragmentation, moral confusion and political division.’” La Prensa

“In the letter, distributed in Querétaro Catholic churches and also in Guanajuato, the Querétaro bishop exhorts that [congregations] ‘not vote for candidates or parties that promote abortion, euthanasia, homosexual or lesbian relationships’ and that they vote ‘for candidates less evil, according to their judgement and conscience.’” El Universal

The only anti-abortion political party routinely covered in articles was the PAN, which professes a political doctrine in opposition to abortion in all cases. PAN leaders opposed the *Ley Robles*, calling it unconstitutional and leading the fight to the Supreme Court, where the law was ultimately upheld. Throughout the sampled articles, PAN leaders maintain there is a constitutional right to life that begins at conception. Thus, the opposition to abortion in all cases is an integral part of what defines the party.

“‘We are not going to renounce who we are, our defense of the dignity of a person from gestation. If we did that we would cease to be who we are and we want to continue being the PAN, but with a modern response to this and other issues, such as sexual preference.’” La Jornada

“‘If someone is in favor of abortion, they do not have a reason to be a PAN member. The position of the party concerning abortion is an untouchable matter.’” Mayor of Mérida, Ana Rosa Payán at National PAN Convention, El Universal

“‘Women are the owners of their bodies, but not of what they carry in their womb.’” Alejandro Landero (PAN) Reforma

Newspaper coverage of NGOs concentrated on those, such as the Pro-Life Group, that allied with the Church. Other NGOs, such as the System for Integral Family Development and the Christian Family Front participated in anti-abortion events, but the Pro-Life Group received the most coverage. Pro-Life worked with the Church and the PAN party to oppose abortion in all cases throughout Mexico. In an article in *Reforma*, Pro-Life director Jorge Serrano Limón praised the film *Punto y Aparte* for its anti-abortion stance.

“It takes life as the only value that should be respected from the moment of conception and that should not be eliminated by abortion. It talks of the physical and psychological consequences that a woman who aborts suffers, and there has not been any other documentary or film with such refinement.” Jorge Serrano Limón, *Reforma*

Mixed Messages and Actors

While most newspaper coverage of abortion focused on the pro-choice and anti-abortion sides of the debate, some articles covered messages with mixed opinions, which consisted of those in favor of abortion under some circumstances. *El Sol de México* covered a survey on abortion opinion which showed that most of the Mexican public fell into the mixed opinion category.

“More than 69 percent of Mexicans think that abortion should be legal under some circumstances...78 percent approve of the interruption of pregnancy when the health of the mother is at risk and 63 percent approve of this method when the product is the result of rape. In terms of the decision that is made when the product has defects, 52 percent of those surveyed said that they would have to permit abortion in these circumstances.” *El Sol de México*

Members of political parties with either pro-choice or anti-abortion platforms have at times asserted themselves to be of mixed opinion. For politicians from leftist parties, this meant expanding the cases under which abortion should be legal, while politicians from conservative parties focused their messages on maintaining the status

quo. This was primarily the case with legalizing abortion when the pregnancy resulted from rape, which was declared constitutional by the Supreme Court during the time period in which articles were sampled. Others sought to legalize abortion for economic reasons, which is legal only in the state of Yucatan.

“María Victoria Peña Acosta, a delegate of Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco, at the 45th National PAN Convention was proposing in a tribunal yesterday to open the opportunity, so that in the doctrinal principles, the party accepts abortion only in cases of rape, illness of the mother or extreme poverty.” El Universal

The individual who received the most news coverage in the category of mixed opinion was Rosario Robles, a member of the PRD party and the mayor of the Federal District, whose *Ley Robles* legalized abortion in the cases of rape, fetal abnormalities and when a woman’s health was at risk. Robles appeared in articles in every newspaper as she advocated for the liberalization of abortion laws in Mexico City and throughout the country.

“The women of the PRD fight for our right to choose. We are respectful of all religions, of all beliefs, of the right of each woman to act in accordance with her [beliefs]. Because of this, because we defend this secular and free vision, we will continue fighting so that women will continue fighting freely for their maternal [rights].” Rosario Robles, Reforma

“Upon enacting the law, she affirmed, ‘I did not tell women to abort, nor did I tell them not to abort. I told them: you are going to decide. If you are at risk of losing your life and you have five children, then you can decide to interrupt that pregnancy so that those children are not left as orphans and I am not going to penalize you for that. If you decide to continue with your pregnancy, knowing the risks, you are within your rights. It is a decision that you are going to make in accordance with your conscience and your religion.’” Rosario Robles, La Jornada

Discussion

There are clear differences in how the abortion debate is portrayed in the five Mexican newspapers examined. The results demonstrate that most articles present only

one viewpoint—pro-choice or anti-abortion—when covering the topic. These viewpoints were dominated by organizations and leaders who represented the polarized opposite sides of the debate rather than by figures who voiced the moderate stance of the majority of the population, as shown in several abortion opinion surveys.

Other studies on abortion and media have focused entirely on the topic of abortion and how that topic itself was presented in article text and quotes. However, abortion is often imbedded in broader issue areas, and this analysis found that the context in which abortion was framed depended on the viewpoint being covered in an article. Anti-abortion leaders, viewing abortion as an issue of morality, frequently paired the topic with same-sex marriage, which is also fervently opposed by the Catholic Church. Strangely, the Church's involvement in electoral politics appeared for the purpose of condemning abortion and same-sex marriage, and often ignored topics more closely related to abortion, such as stem-cell research, euthanasia or contraception, all of which it opposes. The Church has clearly identified abortion and same-sex marriage as key issues. By constantly identifying abortion alongside an issue such as same-sex marriage, as well as issues that are almost universally opposed Mexican society—human cloning, drug trafficking, alcoholism, ethnic or racial discrimination—abortion opponents lump the issue into a seemingly unopposed moral context.

Like previous studies on coverage of abortion in the United States media, this research found that articles placed the issue in the overall context of the women's rights movement (Barakso & Schaffner, 2006; Patterson & Hall, 1998). As feminist organizations become more prominent in Mexican society, they frame abortion in the context of a broader call for equality and as a necessity to improve the public health of

women by preventing maternal mortality due to abortion. In abortion opinion studies, respondents often expressed concern over maternal mortality and violence against women as their reasons for supporting abortion in some circumstances (Garcia *et al.*, 2004). Thus, just as anti-abortion groups have framed abortion in a seemingly unopposed way, pro-choice groups frame abortion in the same way, using as their context the universal right to health and equality of women.

Due to the clandestine nature of abortion in Mexico, statistics are difficult to collect, and incidence can only be estimated. While some articles recognized the wide range of numbers presented by various abortion studies, most cited only one source. An article in *El Sol de México* stated that 200,000 abortions were practiced each year in Mexico, citing a legislator in Mexico City. In contrast, *La Jornada* reported that the number was 850,000 according to the director of the National Institute of Criminal Sciences. In its celebration of the Pro-Life Group's 25th anniversary, the Church congratulated the NGO for preventing 34,549 abortions. While at least one article in each newspaper referred to the range of reported statistics on abortion incidence, the vast majority simply cited one source. However, newspaper readership includes political elites who may use statistics reported in the press to influence legislative decisions. The reporting of questionable statistics could therefore be a concern for those involved in the abortion debate, as the true incidence is not known and this lack of knowledge is not honestly presented in abortion coverage. This problem with accuracy of data may also be of concern in countries with less restrictive abortion laws, but it has not been addressed by existing studies of abortion in the media. The wide range of figures in a country like Mexico make recognition of inaccuracies all the more important.

While coverage of abortion-related events reflected balanced reporting on conferences, forums and protests on all sides of the abortion debate, the lack of reporting on individual abortion cases was notable. The case of Paulina Ramirez defined the abortion debate in Mexico, had a significant effect on abortion legislation, and was the basis for the only peer-reviewed study found on the reporting of abortion in the Mexican press (Taracena, 2002). Yet, in this study's sample of articles the case was referred to only once. Studies in the United States showed that narratives of individual abortion cases were integral in the development of the debate in that country and only became less prevalent with the Roe vs. Wade decision, after which opposing sides focused more on ideological arguments (Patterson & Hall, 1998; Olasky & Olasky, 1986). Although abortion has not been legalized in Mexico, the lack of abortion narratives in the newspaper coverage may reflect the same shift of focus from individual women to the ideological arguments of pro-choice and anti-abortion groups.

Coverage of government and legislation in the abortion debate focused on studies conducted by government agencies regarding unwanted pregnancies, adolescent pregnancies, abortion incidence and maternal mortality data. Agencies and politicians alike viewed this data as indicative of the fact that abortion was an issue that had to be addressed in one way or another. Most agreed that better sex education and increased access to family planning was needed in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies. This was echoed by the PAN, Mexico's conservative ruling party. In the articles, only the Pro-Life Group took a stance against all forms of family planning. The Church, although opposed to contraception in its official doctrine, did not comment on that position in this newspaper coverage. Thus, the coverage reflects a growing acceptance of the importance

of family planning, which is further reflected in the fact that the country's total fertility rate decreased from 5.7 in 1976 to 2.2 in 2003 (INEGI, 2005).

Discussion of whether or not abortion should be debated was also dominated by groups on both sides who were clearly already actively engaged in a debate. The "opening the debate" angle was dominated by abortion advocates; however, a number of op-ed columns focused on the polarization of the issue and commented about the futility of completely pro-choice or anti-abortion arguments in a society where the majority of the public falls in the mixed opinion category.

While surveys show that public opinion does not fall into strictly pro-choice and anti-abortion categories, this is not apparent in newspaper coverage of the topic. A majority (69%) of the population feels that abortion should be legal in some circumstances (Garcia *et al.*, 2004), yet few of the leading figures covered in the sampled articles expressed that opinion. Much like media coverage of abortion in the United States (Patterson & Hall, 1998; Perse *et al.*, 1997), the Mexican press appears to over-represent the extreme sides of the debate.

Previous analysis of newspapers has found that effective coverage is based on the unbiased presentation of information (neutral statistics) or on the presentation of various viewpoints in the same article (Hughes, 2006). In the sample of articles from five Mexico City newspapers, articles from *Reforma* and *El Universal* contained the most balanced coverage. This is consistent with the content analysis conducted by Hughes (2006), who found that *Reforma* and *El Universal* more consistently offered multiple interpretations of political events. Hughes (2006) also found that in two-thirds of news items, only one perspective was presented.

Newspaper coverage of leaders of the abortion debate showed a clear gender divide. While the majority of pro-choice advocates were women who represented NGOs, the majority of anti-abortion advocates were men who represented the Catholic Church. The gender differences carried into politics, as women from the PMP and PRD parties called for the liberalization of abortion laws, and men from the PAN party condemned any further liberalization.

While both newspapers with left-of-center ideologies (*La Jornada* and *El Sol de México*) appeared to favor a pro-choice stance in abortion coverage, both newspapers with right-of-center ideologies (*La Prensa* and *Reforma*) published articles that were split equally between pro-choice and anti-abortion. On the issue of abortion, *El Universal* articles favored pro-choice coverage. Thus, from the sample in this analysis, the political ideologies of the left-of-center papers appear to have come through in the coverage of abortion, whereas more balanced reporting came from the right-of-center newspapers.

Conclusion

The results of this study show the potential for the Mexican print media to play a substantial role in the fueling of the abortion debate. As media has democratized in the past two decades, it has enjoyed increased independence. However, as the media continues to evolve, there remains a responsibility to maintain a balanced presentation of the abortion debate. Balanced coverage that includes multiple viewpoints in single articles will produce a more informed readership that has the potential to influence Mexican abortion policy.

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