



Original research article

National network television news coverage of contraception — a content analysis^{☆,☆☆}

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Abstract

Objective: The objective was to describe and analyze national network television news framing of contraception, recognizing that onscreen news can influence the public's knowledge and beliefs.

Study design: We used the Vanderbilt Television News Archives and LexisNexis Database to obtain video and print transcripts of all relevant national network television news segments covering contraception from January 2010 to June 2014. We conducted a content analysis of 116 TV news segments covering contraception during the rollout of the Affordable Care Act. Segments were quantitatively coded for contraceptive methods covered, story sources used, and inclusion of medical and nonmedical content (intercoder reliability using Krippendorff's alpha ranged 0.6–1 for coded categories).

Results: Most (55%) news stories focused on contraception in general rather than specific methods. The most effective contraceptive methods were rarely discussed (implant, 1%; intrauterine device, 4%). The most frequently used sources were political figures (40%), advocates (25%), the general public (25%) and Catholic Church leaders (16%); medical professionals (11%) and health researchers (4%) appeared in a minority of stories. A minority of stories (31%) featured medical content.

Conclusions: National network news coverage of contraception frequently focuses on contraception in political and social terms and uses nonmedical figures such as politicians and church leaders as sources. This focus deemphasizes the public health aspect of contraception, leading medical professionals and health content to be rarely featured.

Implications: Media coverage of contraception may influence patients' views about contraception. Understanding the content, sources and medical accuracy of current media portrayals of contraception may enable health care professionals to dispel popular misperceptions.

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1. Introduction

People often learn about health care issues from the news media. Media portrayals influence what the public thinks about and how a particular issue is perceived [1–4]. National network TV news still remains an influential information source [5]. In 2014, 24 million people watched the national network news each night, in part for personal health information [6,7]. TV news may also influence the health information people receive from their social networks [8,9].

Prior work has characterized print and TV news media coverage of a variety of health issues [10–17]. Yet no studies have examined the coverage of contraception by network nightly news, information which might enable clinicians to identify and address contraception myths and misrepresentations.

About half of all pregnancies are unintended, and the social and economic costs fall disproportionately on lower-income and less-educated women [18,19]. Both the Institute of Medicine and the US Department of Health and Human Services Healthy People 2020 blueprint have prioritized reducing the unintended pregnancy rate [20,21]. The Affordable Care Act (ACA)'s passage expands coverage of contraception, bringing with it a need for accurate information about contraception so that women can make informed choices.

Of course, discussion about contraception in the United States frequently transcends the boundaries of public health and enters the world of explicit politics [22]. Social narratives about contraception often emphasize the political, ethical and existential aspects of family planning more than the public health implications. This framing influences not only what subjects get covered, but also both what aspects of an issue are emphasized as well as who is selected as a reliable source or content expert. Since the media cannot cover every possible angle, framing determines what gets discussed and what gets left out.

The 2010 passage of the ACA required health plans to cover all FDA-approved contraceptive methods [23]. This contraceptive coverage guarantee immediately increased women's access to contraception, a change that quickly attracted widespread media attention. News coverage included some useful information about contraception. Yet the way that information is presented sends implicit messages about how to think about contraception. Our analysis sought to better understand the current framing of contraception in news media.

2. Methods

We analyzed nightly coverage of contraception on all three major noncable networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, from January 2010 through July 2014. Our sampling period included the months leading up to the March 2010 signing of the ACA by President Obama and the legal challenges to the contraceptive coverage requirements, and culminated with

the Supreme Court decision in *Hobby Lobby v. Burwell* in June 2014. We analyzed the content of each news story in two ways: individual coders independently coded each story transcript, and two coders double-coded all available matching video segments. No institutional ethical approval was required for this study.

2.1. Selection of news stories

We searched the Vanderbilt Television News Archive (<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu>) using a list of both broad and specific terms for contraceptive methods including *contraception*, *birth control*, *the pill*, *emergency contraception*, *the morning after pill*, *Plan B*, *Ella*, *Ella One*, *Depo-Provera*, *Nuva Ring*, *contraceptive patch*, *intrauterine device*, *IUD*, *Mirena*, *Paragard*, *Implanon*, *Nexplanon*, *family planning*, *natural family planning*, *rhythm method*, *sterilization*, *tubal ligation*, *condoms*, *male contraception*, *abstinence* and *pregnancy prevention*. Our search yielded 1049 possible segments. Manual review led to 935 exclusions, mostly related to search terms *plan B* (884) and *the pill* (32), search terms that pulled in numerous segments unrelated to contraception. These excluded segments were segments that included the phrase “plan B” used in the colloquial sense of a backup plan and those including discussion of a variety of other medications in pill form. An additional 19 segments were excluded due to lack of topical relevance. We used the LexisNexis database to obtain transcripts for the remaining 116 segments and requested the video segments from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. Eight video segments were not yet archived at the time of the study and were unavailable for visual coding.

2.2. Content analysis

We performed a content analysis of the relevant TV news stories, coding both transcripts of news segments and the video segments. To code more reliably, we used two explicit coding instruments to code each story: one for transcripts and one for visual coding. Coding instruments were developed by the research team based on a literature review of prior studies addressing media coverage of health topics. Pilot testing, coding scheme refinement and coder training were done on a sample of segments from 2009 outside our study sampling frame.

2.2.1. Manual coding of stories

The final coding instrument included four key areas: (a) contraceptive methods; (b) story source types; (c) medical content including effectiveness, method use, risks and noncontraceptive benefits (which matched the CDC's definition of “effective contraceptive information”) and (d) nonmedical ACA-related content including access, coverage and cost [24]. We also noted any mention of abortion, given the high political salience of the subject. Each transcript was coded by a single coder (authors E.W.P., L.S.H., M.H.M.). A random probability sample of 10% of transcripts was triple

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