



Original research article

# “The stakes are so high”: interviews with progressive journalists reporting on abortion<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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**Abstract**

**Objectives:** Because news frames can influence public and policy agendas, proponents of abortion access should be concerned with how this issue is covered in the news. While previous research has examined the content of news on abortion, this analysis explores the process of newsmaking on abortion, examining how journalists understand their role in and experience of covering abortion.

**Study design:** We recruited journalists with experience reporting on abortion through listservs for progressive and feminist reporters. Thirty-one participants, with experiences at 75 diverse media outlets, completed in-depth, open-ended interviews. We used grounded theory to code interview transcripts in Dedoose to identify emergent themes.

**Results:** Journalists described many challenges that applied to reporting generally, but that they perceived to be more difficult around abortion: grappling with the meaning of “neutrality” on this issue, finding new angles for articles, and handling editors with varying knowledge of abortion. Over one-third ( $n=13$ ) of participants mentioned feeling that the stakes were higher around abortion: this urgency and polarization left journalists frustrated by efforts to find new sources or angles on abortion stories. Finally, over 80% ( $n=28$ ) of participants reported experiencing anti-abortion harassment as a result of their abortion work.

**Conclusions:** The difficulties journalists described when reporting on abortion were often rooted in abortion stigma and the political polarization around the issue. This pattern was true even for reporters who worked to counter abortion stigma through their reporting.

**Implications:** Advocates interested in accurate, destigmatizing news frames might work pro-actively to educate editors and increase reporters’ access to providers, patients, and advocates.

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**Keywords:** Media; Culture; Abortion; Abortion stigma; Journalism

**1. Introduction**

In the United States, few public debates are as fraught as those around abortion. Media-effects research indicates that news media can powerfully influence that debate, both through setting policy agendas [1–3] and framing the way in which the public and policymakers understand the issue [4–6]. Thus, those concerned with the overall quality of abortion coverage should work to understand the challenges inherent in reporting on this topic.

Prior research on abortion reporting has examined how rhetoric and media frames have shifted [7,8], becoming increasingly partisan [9] and homogenized [10,11]. The cultural abortion debate extends into newsrooms: conservative journalists decry a perceived bias in support of abortion rights among their colleagues [12–15], while progressive outlets criticize abortion stigma and misinformation in news coverage [16,17]. Research supports these latter criticisms, finding that media frequently use negative language and framing when covering abortion [18,19], and that such frames work to produce abortion stigma [20,21].

Journalist’s practices are also rapidly shifting. Digital technologies and social media have compressed news cycles and increased pressures to publish stories quickly, which may conflict with traditional journalistic values of accuracy and balance [22,23]. Economic pressures have reduced

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reporting staffs [24,25] and increased outlets' reliance on freelance reporters, who are more frequently women [26] and potentially more entrepreneurial than staff reporters [27,28].

Given the tremendous potential of media to impact how abortion is understood and the quickly evolving ways in which news is reported, this paper explores the critical question of how journalists understand their role in and experience of covering abortion today.

## 2. Methods

Between April and June 2016, we conducted 31 in-depth interviews with journalists who had reported on abortion. Allendale, an independent institutional review board, approved our recruitment and protocol.

### 2.1. Recruitment

To recruit participants, we emailed two listservs for journalists, with follow-up emails to individuals we identified, through their previous work, to be subscribers. We did not recruit journalists of any particular political leaning; however, these listservs are run by organizations dedicated to creating community for feminist-identified journalists. After each interview, we asked participants to recommend additional interviewees. In total, we sent out 107 interview requests based on these referrals.

### 2.2. Sample

The sample included some diversity of age, race/ethnicity, and geographic location, though there was a notably high frequency of white participants, and participants in the northeastern United States (Table 1). Most participants were women. There was wide diversity in income; monthly household incomes ranged from \$1500 to \$25,000.

About two-thirds of participants ( $n=20$ ) were staff writers, while the remaining participants ( $n=11$ ) were freelance reporters. Participants had experience writing at 75 different media outlets, including television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, with a range of distributions (i.e., international, national, regional) and audiences (e.g., general interest, progressive, feminist). While all participants had experience reporting on abortion, very few described abortion or reproductive health as their sole area of focus.

### 2.3. Interviews

The second author and a research assistant, both trained in qualitative methods, completed 31 phone interviews, until jointly concluding that we had achieved saturation. Interviews ranged from 21 to 88 min, with an average of 45 min. In compensation for their time, interviewers offered participants a \$10 gift card. After collecting demographic information, we asked participants to describe their under-

Table 1  
Demographic characteristics

	Frequency
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	2
Female	29
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
White	22
Black	3
Latinx	2
Asian	1
Biracial/Mixed	3
<i>Age</i>	
21–30	7
31–40	13
41–50	6
51–60	3
61–70	2
<i>Region</i>	
Northeast	15
Midatlantic	5
Southeast	2
Midwest	1
Southwest	4
West Coast	4

standing of their role in covering abortion and any difficulties they encountered in doing so.

### 2.4. Analysis

After each interview, the interviewers compiled shared notes, which they used to identify emergent themes and develop a preliminary code list. We audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the interviews in Dedoose, using modified grounded theory techniques [29]. The iterative process of coding and analysis allowed for identification of new themes, including codes that captured recurring experiences (e.g., anti-abortion harassment), and challenges (e.g., the need to remain neutral). The second author coded all transcripts, in consultation with the research assistant. The first author reviewed all coded transcripts in full; the first and second authors jointly decided when analytical saturation was reached.

## 3. Results

Participants faced several challenges in covering abortion: varying understandings of neutrality, editorial obstacles, difficulty finding new sources and angles for stories, and harassment from anti-abortion advocates. While many of these challenges also pertain to reporting on other topics [30], our analysis is primarily concerned with how such challenges manifest when covering abortion, with the intent of providing insight into how news coverage of abortion might be improved.

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