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The Abortion Debate in Mexico: Newspaper Coverage and Discourse, 2001-2003

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Abstract

Background: Abortion in Mexico is highly restricted, and the issue has been openly debated as policymakers consider reforming abortion legislation. The newly free press in Mexico plays a key role in informing the public about the abortion debate.

Methods: Using a sample of 100 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 from 2001 to 2003.

Results: Non-governmental organizations and Catholic Church representatives were the principal social actors, with coverage also given to policymakers who support liberalization of abortion laws. Most articles present only one viewpoint when covering abortion, dominated by organizations and leaders who represent the extreme sides of the debate.

Conclusion: Abortion has earned a prominent place on the public agenda and in the news media. Future research should continue to monitor and document newspaper coverage of abortion as the legal context evolves in Mexico.

Key Words: *Abortion, Mexico, Media, Newspapers*

Introduction

In Mexico, abortion laws are highly restrictive, and only when a woman becomes pregnant as the result of rape is abortion legal in all 32 states, including the Federal District (Mexico City) (GIRE 2007). Nevertheless, approximately 875,000 abortions are practiced there each year (Juarez et al. 2008). 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 often plays out between the conservative National Action Party (PAN), which has a strict anti-abortion platform, and the leftist Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), which advocates for more liberal abortion laws (Lamas and 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 President Vicente Fox's victory in 2000, followed by the election of fellow PAN candidate President Felipe Calderón in 2006, and its party members consistently oppose abortion (Lamas and Bissell 2000).

Despite PAN control of the executive branch, Mexico City has a recent history of incremental and progressive legal reform regarding abortion. In 2000 the PRD and PRI parties enacted the "Ley Robles" in Mexico City, which legalized abortion in cases of fetal malformation and when a woman's health was at risk (Lamas and Bissell 2000). The Ley Robles was upheld by the Mexican Supreme Court in January of 2002, and the law was further liberalized to include women who became pregnant as the result of rape or nonconsensual artificial insemination (Kendrick 2003). More recently, in April 2007, the Mexico City Legislative Assembly voted to legalize abortion under all circumstances up to 12 weeks gestation (McKinley 2007).

In the past two decades a free press has risen in Mexico, increasing the legitimacy of print media as a source of objective information on abortion (Lawson 2002; Hughes 2006). Recently, various cases involving abortion received significant media attention. Among those, the case of Paulina del Carmen Ramirez Jacinto 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 (Lara et al. 2003). Influenced by visits from anti-abortion representatives, as well as by hospital officials who exaggerated the risks of abortion, Paulina carried 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 (Taracena 2002). 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 the national press and public opinion polls, the governor of Guanajuato vetoed the bill (Lamas and 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 impacts of media on health attitudes and behaviors and, more specifically, reproductive health policy, are well documented (Olasky and Olasky 1986; Patterson and Hall 1998; Terkildsen et al. 1998; Dutilh Novaes 2000; Taracena 2002; Stephenson and Lee 2003; Pruitt and Mullen 2005; Barakso and Schaffner 2006). While media coverage of an issue can affect public perception of that issue, the media also plays a more passive role because it must focus on topics that most interest news consumers. Thus, the news both shapes and reflects the public agenda (Perse et al. 1997).¹ A study on perceptions of induced abortion in Brazil found that mass media has a significant influence on public opinion regarding abortion in that country (Dutilh Novaes 2000). 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 (Terkildsen et al. 1998; Barakso and Schaffner 2006). 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 has moved faster toward independence. Newspapers are still considered more independent than other media forms in Mexico, which are often criticized for having an overly sensationalist focus (Lawson 2002; Johnson 2006). Only 10% to 15% of Mexicans report that their news comes primarily from newspapers; 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).

¹ The effect of media on its audiences is a topic not fully resolved in the broader theoretical communications literature. This paper is primarily concerned with how the press portrays abortion, and less with issues of bi-directional causality. The authors acknowledge that media has an effect on society and, conversely, society has an effect on media. Regardless of causal direction, an examination of the different ways in which media portrays abortion remains important.

This study examines the context in which abortion is discussed in five Mexico City newspapers during the first years of President Fox's presidency, a time when the rise of the conservative PAN coincided with an increasingly active feminist movement, a newly free press, and growing debate about Mexico's restrictive abortion laws. The study identifies the social actors that are associated in the press with various arguments supporting and opposing abortion and documents the context in which abortion is presented to the public in the print media. It seeks to better understand how this controversial issue is discussed in influential Mexican newspapers, which can play an important role in shaping how key stakeholders and the general public perceive the abortion debate.

Methods

Five newspapers based in Mexico City (*El Universal*, *La Jornada*, *Reforma*, *La Prensa* and *El Sol de México*) were selected to represent publications that, according to Lawson's (2002) study of the Mexican press, were associated with the political 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, researchers at the Mexican reproductive health advocacy organization GIRE (Grupo de Información en Reproducción Elegida) searched daily hard copy editions of each newspaper and identified all articles containing the word "abortion" either in the title or in the body of the article. Of the 600 articles collected from the GIRE database, 100 were randomly sampled for analysis.

One coder analyzed article content using MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. 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 balanced coverage of both pro-choice and anti-abortion viewpoints. Neutral articles contained no opinions and primarily covered abortion statistics.

Results

Of the 100 analyzed news articles and op-eds, 27 were from *Reforma*, 24 from *La Jornada*, 21 from *El Sol de México*, 17 from *El Universal* and 11 from *La Prensa*.

Thirty-eight covered 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.

Table 1. Abortion positions of sampled articles (n=100)

Newspaper	Pro-choice	Anti-abortion	Mixed opinion	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), and 14 were op-eds. Of the op-eds, seven reflected mixed or neutral opinions toward abortion. Five op-eds were classified as pro-choice, and two were anti-abortion. *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 the abortion debate

Abortion was often reported in the context of other controversial issues. Anti-abortion groups 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...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 reflective 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*

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 drafting 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*). An alternative sentiment was provided in

coverage of the pro-choice non-governmental organization (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 principal 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

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...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 NGOs, although the Church has also become involved in the reporting of abortion-related data generated by pro-life programs.

“The Catholic Church praised the work of the Pro-Life Group 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

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...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 their health and life [at risk].” 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 leading cause of maternal mortality in the northern state of Chihuahua (*El Sol de México*). 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 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 concentrated on either pro-choice or anti-abortion viewpoints, although some events 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 anti-abortion advocacy organization Grupo Provida’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...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*, in addition to a forum on *The Herods of the New Century: Violence and Infant Mistreatment*. *La Jornada* covered the 25th anniversary of Grupo Provida 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’...where topics will be discussed that according to the bishop of Querétaro go against the Catholic religion.” *La Jornada*

Coverage of government agencies and abortion legislation

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.” *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 advocates.

“[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 now defunct leftist party, Mexico Possible (PMP), and the PRD 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*

Pro-choice messages and actors

Pro-choice messages 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 modern 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 about 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...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*

In addition to pro-choice arguments, coverage of abortion advocates also included their protests against involvement of the Catholic Church in electoral politics. PMP leader Patricia Mercado’s 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 actors in newspaper coverage. NGOs such as Catholics for the Right to Choose, 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*

Pro-choice 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 of 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...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 a 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 [and ends at] 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 assert its resistance to all initiatives that would liberalize abortion laws. Through apostolic announcements, voting handbooks, sermons and press releases, its leaders 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 includes in its political doctrine an 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 anti-abortion NGOs concentrated on those, such as Grupo Provida, 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 Grupo Provida received the most coverage. Provida worked with the Church and the PAN party to oppose abortion in all cases throughout Mexico. In an article in *Reforma*, Provida 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.” *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 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, a condition under which abortion 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.

“[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].” *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.’” *La Jornada*

Discussion

The abortion debate is portrayed differently in each of the five Mexican newspapers examined. 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 extreme 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 isolated topic was presented in article text and quotes. However, abortion is often embedded in broader issues, 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. By constantly identifying abortion alongside an issue such as same-sex marriage, as well as issues that they view as unquestionably immoral—human cloning, drug trafficking, alcoholism, ethnic or racial discrimination—abortion opponents lump the subject within a context of issues that are not broadly accepted within Mexican public opinion.

Like previous studies on coverage of abortion in the United States media, this research found that many articles placed the issue in the overall context of the women's rights movement (Patterson and Hall 1998; Barakso and Schaffner, 2006). 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 context of issues that are universally opposed, pro-choice groups frame abortion in a similar way, using as their context the universally supported right to health and equality of women.

Due to the clandestine nature of abortion in Mexico, incidence data are difficult to collect and can only be estimated. While some articles recognized the wide range of numbers presented by various abortion studies, most cited only one source. Although at least one article in each newspaper referred to the range of reported data on abortion incidence, the vast majority did not. However, newspaper readership includes political elites who may cite statistics reported in the press to influence legislative decisions. The reporting of varying estimates may be a concern for those involved in the abortion debate because the true incidence of unsafe abortion cannot be known. Consequently, the lay reader may interpret the media's presentation of inconsistent abortion estimates as junk science, dishonest reporting, or both. 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

incidence estimates in a country like Mexico, where abortion is legally restricted, make recognition of that range imperative in facilitating constructive debate.

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 Grupo Provida 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 the analyzed articles. Thus, the coverage suggests a growing acceptance of the importance of family planning, which is further reflected in the decrease of the country's total fertility rate from 5.7 in 1976 to 2.2 in 2003 (INEGI 2005).

While surveys show that public opinion does not fall into strictly pro-choice and anti-abortion categories, this is not reflected in newspaper coverage of the topic. In 2000, a majority (69%) of Mexican adults felt that abortion should be legal in some circumstances (Garcia et al. 2004), yet few of the leaders covered in the sampled articles expressed that opinion. Much like media coverage of abortion in the United States (Perse et al. 1997; Patterson and Hall 1998), the Mexican press appears to over-represent the extreme sides of the debate.

Previous analyses of polemical issues in newspapers have found that effective coverage is based on the unbiased presentation of objective information such as incidence or mortality data, 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 most pro-choice advocates were women who represented NGOs, most 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. This gender divide evident in newspaper coverage differs with the Garcia et al. (2004) abortion opinion study, which found that men were significantly more likely than women to hold pro-choice opinions.

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

This analysis provides a snapshot of the primary political arguments and social actors contributing to the abortion debate in major Mexican newspapers in the first years of President Fox's term. Less than a year after newly elected president Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006, abortion earned an even higher place on the public agenda and in the news media, particularly in light of the heavily disputed April 2007 reform that legalized abortion during the first trimester in Mexico City. Public health advocates and media researchers interested in the topic of abortion should continue to monitor press coverage of the issue as the legal context evolves; to make efforts to sensitize journalists to the importance of providing balanced and informed information on this polemical topic; and to train key stakeholders on how to speak to journalists about the often complex public health, legal and political aspects of the abortion debate.

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