

Pursuing Order: Ten Years of Editorial Coverage of the Abortion Issue in *The Globe and Mail*

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ABSTRACT

A chief function of elite newspapers is the reproduction of order. Ten years (1977-86) of Toronto *Globe and Mail* editorials about abortion were studied. A total of 40 were found with 30 of these appearing in the last three years of the decade. The editorials demonstrate that the mainstream media dislike those perceived as ideologues, call for moderation, and give preferred coverage to professionals, while virtually ignoring discussion of the ethics of abortion. The editorials cite men eight times as often as women.

RÉSUMÉ

Un des rôles essentiels des quotidiens d'élite est de représenter l'ordre. Les éditoriaux du *Globe and Mail* de Toronto ayant pour objet l'avortement furent étudiés sur une période de dix ans (1977-86). Un total de 40 furent découverts, dont 30 avaient été publiés durant les trois années précédant la fin de la décennie. Les éditoriaux démontrent une aversion générale envers les gens perçus comme idéologues et une préférence pour ceux faisant appel à la modération; ils donnent aussi préférence de couverture aux professionnels, et évitent virtuellement toute discussion sur l'éthique de l'avortement. Les éditoriaux citent les hommes huit fois plus souvent que les femmes.

Introduction

JOURNALISTS ARE INTELLECTUAL WORKERS partly responsible for defining what is proper and sensible, and what is deviant and divisive. That is, "Journalists are central agents in the reproduction of order" (Ericson et al. 1987, p. 3). The order reproduced is that which services the dominant elements in society, although this order must incorporate important interests of subordinate elements (Gramsci, 1971). Altschull (1984) argues that media are agents of power as do Herman and Chomsky (1988). Clearly, the Canadian abortion debate presents difficulties for those concerned with the reproduction of order.

Gans (1979), based on participant observation studies of CBS, NBC, *Time* and *Newsweek*, argued that the mass media disdain those perceived as pursuing an ideology, that is, those who stray from the path of common sense. Eagleton (1991, p. 3) supplies a useful definition of the concept of ideology as used by media:

To claim in ordinary conversation that someone is speaking ideologically is surely to hold that they are judging a particular issue through some rigid framework of preconceived ideas which distorts their understanding.

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Moderation is one enduring value of the media. Groups labelled radical or immoderate whose values may be polar opposites will be ignored, criticized and ridiculed. Gans disagrees with those who perceive the media as promoting disorder and sensationalism. A second enduring value of the media is the desirability of social order. Order maintenance is so important that accuracy may sometimes be sacrificed to it (Breed, 1955).

The order to be maintained is that of the holders of formal authority, the order of the upper and middle classes and the white male social order (Gans, 1979). Subject to the value of moderation, media support elite interpretations of events (Altschull, 1984; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Moreover, media act to establish a hierarchy of credibility (Becker, 1967). Media functionaries interview and present the views of some and do not interview and present the views of others. Press coverage then is ideological, despite journalists' harping on objectivity, because it gives preferred coverage to the messages and spokespersons of some organizations compared to others (Ericson et al., 1987). McDaniel (1985) charges that the abortion debate in Canada has a male bias, that is, males are heard and women are not.

Feminists argue that media representations of the abortion debate cannot be objective but are constructed on the basis of certain ideological assumptions and values (Steeves, 1987). A major means of managing women is control over women's reproductive processes. Because a newspaper must make its interpretations appear natural, a matter of common sense (Chibnall, 1977), control of abortion by professional, medical and legal elites will be presented by the media as natural and proceeding from common sense principles. Grounding interpretations in law and science are particularly effective ways of doing so. "Both law and science offer convincing ways of construing fact according to apparently neutral, general and universal criteria" (Ericson et al., 1987, p. 21). The interpretations and actions of lawyers, lawmakers, doctors and other professionals are granted preferred standing in the media hierarchy of credibility. The promotion of common sense permits media to alleviate the need

for further investigation and consideration, thereby disguising the ideological implications of an issue.

Journalists resent portrayals of themselves as ideologues (Schudson, 1978), seeing themselves as professionals presenting balanced information. However, press coverage is ideological in that it encompasses a particular set of procedures for obtaining and presenting knowledge to the exclusion of alternative ways (Tuchman, 1978; Ericson et al., 1987). Professionalism is partially an ideology (Rado, 1981; Schudson, 1978; Johnson, 1977).

For a media system hostile to "immoderates," the abortion debate presents enormous difficulties. Both sides of the debate in the period of our investigation (1977-86) were questioning the common sense notion that abortion was a medical issue.

Each side has a clear vision of the place of the child in society, the place of the family and crucially, the appropriate role of women within the family and society. These world views include more subtle, but equally held views, on the appropriate role of the state and church in maintenance and promotion of what is socially preferable for women. (McDaniel, 1985, p. 75)

The 1969 changes to the Criminal Code permitting therapeutic abortions legalized established medical practices (McDaniel, 1985). However, the 1969 "compromise" was decidedly unacceptable to both sides of the debate. McDaniel criticizes the law on a number of grounds. The law gives a monopoly over abortion services to the medical establishment, which supports the view that abortion is a technical medical matter. The law permits "the overwhelmingly male physicians on abortion committees to reign supreme as they decide, presumably on medical grounds, the fates of female 'patients' they generally never see" (McDaniel, 1985, p. 78). Since the legislation lacks guidelines, abortion committees can act arbitrarily. Rapp (1981) points out that committees must determine if an "illness" is of sufficient severity to warrant abortion when "sufficient seriousness" is not defined. Furthermore, abortion is not equally accessible across the country; in 1982, 17 hospitals were performing 75 percent of the abortions in Canada (McDaniel, 1985).

From the other side, the law is equally unsatisfactory.

We also know the change was worded in such a way as to permit virtual abortion on demand. From the parliamentary debates in 1969 it is clear that this development was contrary to the expressly stated purpose of the government which intended to permit abortion only under "fairly restricted circumstances." (de Valk, 1981, p. 11)

In short, those opposed to abortion see the 1969 law as being used in ways it was not intended—free standing abortion clinics being a particularly offensive way.

Feminists favouring abortion are questioning the control of women's reproductive capacity by the medical establishment (Oakley, 1980, 1981). Lucker (1984) says that improvements in obstetrical science by the 1950s had all but removed the necessity to perform abortions just to save the life of the mother. Abortion is thus not a medical issue but an ethical one. Here feminists agree with those opposing abortion. "Abortion is not a medical problem, though it is a medical procedure, a procedure which takes about fifteen or twenty minutes" (de Valk, 1981, p. 13). Both sides can be seen as threats to professional control of abortion. Rodman (1981) regards medical control of abortion as an avenue around the restrictive features of the law and points out the extreme difficulty of making psychiatric and medical decisions to justify abortion. This of course raises the whole issue of the appropriateness of the medical model to a range of "psychological problems" (Szasz, 1970).

Our study looks at ten years (1977–1986 inclusive) of editorial comment on abortion by Toronto's *Globe and Mail*. This work is one aspect of a three-part study which included a comparative content analysis of the news coverage for one year of Toronto's three daily newspapers and a ten-year study of the news coverage by *The Globe and Mail*.

The Globe and Mail was chosen because it is the newspaper of Canadian elites and is the only Canadian newspaper with pretensions to being na-

tional. The Royal Commission on Newspapers (1981) reports that it "is read by almost three-quarters of the country's most important decision-makers in all parts of Canada and at all levels of government" (p. 138).

Methodology

Globe and Mail editorials for the years 1977 to 1986 inclusive were inspected. The year 1977 was examined in microfiche, while the subsequent years were examined through the Infoglobe data base, using abortion as the key word.

For an editorial to be included, it was not sufficient for the word *abortion* to appear in the text. An editorial had to be substantially about the issue of abortion. An editorial that referred to abortion while substantially addressing another issue was not included. Two coders independently sorted editorials. To be included, an editorial had to be independently selected by both coders. The two coders chose 43 editorials, but three were rejected because both had not chosen them (see Appendix).

The coders then coded the remaining 40 editorials for gender of source, that is, the gender of those named in the editorial. There was no disagreement on gender of source.

Results

How much the mainstream press dislikes those perceived as ideologues is illustrated in the April 4, 1986 *Globe and Mail* editorial, "What Feminism This." Here the *Globe* comments on a federal government report entitled *A Feminist Review of Criminal Law*. The report was written by four women, three of them lawyers, the fourth, a professor of criminology. *The Globe and Mail*, noting that it would be fatuous to criticize a feminist report for being a feminist report, also notes what the editorial writer(s) considered to be a few solid points raised in the report, then says: "Unfortunately, too much of this report degenerates into the sort of presumption and illogic that gives 'isms' not just feminism a bad name" (our emphasis). *The Globe and Mail* then proceeds to slam the report:

- (a) In the context of a discussion of abortion, the report argues that women do not have control of sexual intercourse. *The Globe and Mail* says, "this view is to deny women their existence as responsible adults in a consensual sex act—an extraordinarily patronizing attitude."
- (b) *The Globe and Mail* resents the report's view that imprisonment, because it ruptures family ties, is for women inherently more cruel than for men.
- (c) *The Globe and Mail* resents what it sees as virulent suspicions of male conspiracy. One writer of the report is skeptical of laws against the customers of prostitutes, predicting they may not be energetically enforced because the legal system is predominantly male. *The Globe and Mail* comments that this suspicion of males "swims through the chapters like a virus."
- (d) The report advocates the defence of necessity for people who commit, among other offenses, welfare fraud for the sake of their children. *The Globe and Mail* sarcastically asks if the justification for welfare fraud would be pegged to the value of welfare cheques.

The *Globe and Mail's* position on "isms," however, is perhaps best summarized by quoting its concluding assessment of this feminist report: "in too many places, the contentions drift free of any reasonable mooring."

A. Attention to Issue and Moderation

The Globe and Mail devoted 40 editorials to abortion between 1977 and 1986 inclusive, with 30 of those occurring in the last three years of that decade. While the opening of the Morgentaler clinic in Toronto in mid-1983 contributes to this 1984 to 1986 increase, that does not provide a complete explanation. Five of the 9 editorials in 1984, 3 of the 10 editorials in 1985, and 6 of the 11 editorials in 1986 did not focus on Morgentaler. An editorial of June 18, 1983 supplies a clue to understanding the *Globe and Mail's* redoubled interest in abortion.

The short editorial simply notes without comment that in 1981 in Toronto, abortions exceeded live births and that these shocking figures call for serious thought. *The Globe and Mail* signalled to itself and its readers that this issue was something to think about; in Cohen's (1973) terms, abortion was put on the public agenda.

The Morgentaler clinic attracted protesters. An August 8, 1985 editorial lauds the Roman Catholic Bishop of Toronto, Cardinal Carter, for his temperate views: the Cardinal wanted protestors at the clinic limited to five. The editorial regrets others opposed to abortion are not as temperate. Another editorial on September 30, 1986 roundly denounces the harassment, including a threatened boycott of the locksmith who regularly repaired vandalized locks at the clinic. In the most strongly worded editorial (April 29, 1986), *The Globe and Mail* charges anti-abortionists with conducting witch-hunts when they picket the homes of clinic staff. Using phrases like "character assassination" and "poisonous tactic," the editorial reminds protestors that this matter is for the legal system to wrestle with and that extremism cannot be tolerated in Canadian society. Overall, 10 of the 40 editorials explicitly extol moderation (Jan. 22, 1985; Mar. 13, 1985; May 15, 1985; July 30, 1985; Aug. 28, 1985; Sept. 16, 1985; Jan. 28, 1986; Feb. 12, 1986; April 29, 1986; Sept. 30, 1986).

B. Silencing Women

McDaniel's (1985) contention that abortion is quintessentially a women's issue but that women's voices are essentially absent from public debate is supported by the fact that men are mentioned eight times more often than women are mentioned by name in the *Globe and Mail* editorials. Men are mentioned by name 66 times and women are mentioned by name 8 times. When women are mentioned, it is not always in the context of their views on abortion; often the context is peripheral to the debate. For example, in an editorial regarding the draft of the Health Care Consent Act (Feb. 22, 1980), Dr. Diane Sacks, acting director of the clinic for adolescents at the Hospital for Sick Children, is quoted as commenting in general that doctors

would feel more comfortable if they knew they could treat their young patients without fear of law suits.

An editorial on December 19, 1981 ridicules Toronto Transit Commissioner June Rowlands after she objected to an anti-abortion poster proposed for the Toronto subway system. Her objection was to the emotionally charged and disturbing nature of the poster.

In four cases, women are mentioned almost in passing. For example, on March 13, 1985, an editorial focuses on the lack of restraint in the public debate and criticizes the Catholic Register for an hysterical attack on a letter written by Norma Scarborough, President of the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (C.A.R.A.L.). Scarborough is mentioned in parenthesis in another editorial (Aug. 28, 1985) when *The Globe and Mail* praises Cardinal Carter for his suggestion that pickets be limited at the Morgentaler clinic. It seems Scarborough had already called for such a limit. In the same editorial, Gwen Landolt of Campaign Life is taken to task because her immoderate response to the Cardinal's suggestion is "we'll continue with business as usual."

Maureen McTeer is mentioned in passing in a January 28, 1986 editorial which denounces as immoderate Campaign Life's call for Joe Clark's resignation from the federal cabinet after his wife became an honorary director of C.A.R.A.L. Similarly, Dr. Nikki Colodny is mentioned in passing, along with Morgentaler and Dr. Robert Scott, in an editorial (Sept. 26, 1986) supporting staying new charges against the three doctors until the Supreme Court renders its decision.

In an editorial on May 15, 1985, a woman's views are explicitly noted. The writer quotes Hedwig Wasser of the Diocesan Missionary Council of Groningen as telling the Pope that "rigid doctrine had forced many of us ... to be disobedient to the Church." According to the editorial, she goes on to ask why bishops are "reigning over us instead of with us and in the midst of us?" The editorial calls this a "blunt, healthy form of expression" and contrasts it to the bottle-throwing mobs in the street

whose actions were a "disgusting and appallingly inappropriate" response to the Pope's visit to the Netherlands. Hedwig Wasser wins the approval of *The Globe and Mail* by operating within the liberal consensus.

C. Preferred Coverage

When a count was made of the occupations of those referred to in the *Globe and Mail* editorials, we found that the medical profession is predominant with 21 mentions. Elected politicians are referred to 19 times and the legal establishment (lawyers and judges) appear 12 times. Clerics, who it should be noted are not quoted in the context of theology or ethics, appear 11 times. Of six cases where no occupation was noted, four are women. In only one case does *The Globe and Mail* refer to an ethicist. A December 1, 1984 editorial condemns the "extremist" position of anti-abortionists who want a vaccine against German measles banned because it had been developed from tissue of an aborted fetus. The editorial closes by quoting Reverend Jack Gallagher, director of the Cardinal Carter Centre for Bioethics at Toronto's Saint Michael's College, as rejecting that as justification for not using the vaccine. In short, the editorials virtually ignore the ethics of abortion.

The *Globe's* devotion to the ideology of professionalism is stated most explicitly in an editorial of February 7, 1986. When Morris Manning, lawyer for Henry Morgentaler, took a case for an anti-union client, some Morgentaler supporters wanted the doctor to find another lawyer. *The Globe* derides this, saying "lawyers may or may not believe in the cause their clients are fighting for; but they will, as professionals, argue the merits of that cause as persuasively as they can."

D. Dr. Henry Morgentaler

Morgentaler is first mentioned in an editorial of October 21, 1983 as the subject of a preliminary hearing in Manitoba. Four editorials in 1984 put the emphasis on the responsibility of the politicians to face the issue squarely. No advice is given about what exactly the politicians should do, but *The Globe* advises that the courts must be allowed to

finish their work on the Morgentaler case. The majority of the seven Morgentaler editorials in 1985 are devoted to order restoration (e.g., the more extreme tactics of those protesting at the clinic are condemned). Repeated emphasis is placed on letting the legal process run its course; one editorial advises the premier of Ontario not to paint himself into a corner with a premature decision on free-standing abortion clinics. The five Morgentaler editorials of 1986 pursue the established themes. The merits of Morgentaler's actions are not the focus of concern; what is stressed is that the "neutral" institutions of the law be left to deal with the issue.

Conclusion

We believe that *The Globe and Mail* skilfully attempted to maintain order in the face of a potentially very disorderly process. There is little editorial comment in the early years of our study; the first response to "immoderate" movements is to ignore them (Morris, 1973). However, abortion in the 1980s could not be ignored. Two connected events moved abortion high onto the *Globe and Mail's* agenda. One was the recognition encoded in the editorial of June 18, 1983 to the effect that abortions in Toronto exceeded live births in 1981. Morgentaler's arrival clearly indicated that 20 abortions a day could not meet demand.

The establishing of the Morgentaler clinic in Toronto in mid-1983 coincides with an increase in both news and editorial activity about abortion by *The Globe and Mail* (Lake & Scrimger, 1991). This is not surprising. The protests and legal action permit the dramatization of the issue and allow the story to be organized around a personality (Bennett, 1988). Whether his clinic will be permitted to stay open supplies a story line with a beginning (the opening of the clinic), a middle (protests, court action), and an ending (the final status of the clinic) (Epstein, 1974). Suspense is generated, the issue given narrative form (Carey, 1988). Morgentaler and the activities of his opponents provide a focus which guarantees an orderly flow of news which is critical to a bureaucracy faced with daily deadlines (Tuchman, 1978). Morgentaler permits *The Globe and Mail* to focus on the law and the management of order during the legal proceedings. Whether by

design or not, this permits the avoidance of hard ethical quandaries and the question of why doctors control abortion. That Morgentaler is male and a professional focuses on the activities of a member of preferred groups.

While the *Globe and Mail's* liberal stance supported abortions taking place within the law and under professional control, the editorial board was not prepared to endorse anything that smacked of abortion on demand. A reading of editorials does not permit a definitive answer to why not. An interpretation of this, consistent with Altschull (1984), Herman and Chomsky (1988), and Chibnall (1977), is as follows.

First, the Catholic Church, backed by other groups, was opposed to abortion on grounds not susceptible to "reasonable liberal" persuasion. Second, abortion on demand is advocated mainly by "feminists," by media definition in the period of our investigation a group exemplifying extremism. Thirdly and more importantly, abortion on demand removes the control of abortion, and thereby the control of women's reproductive capacity, from professional control. Abortion on demand is a direct attack on the management of society by professional elites. Fourthly, abortion on demand *clearly and unequivocally* removes abortion from the realm of a technical, medical decision to the realm of ethics. Fifthly, abortion on demand is an invitation to direct action, something abhorrent to the liberal consensus. Anti-abortion forces in Canada could not be envisioned accepting a policy of abortion on demand. Acts of civil disobedience would ensue. Observance of the law, the safe and snug harbour of liberal newspapers, would be endangered.

A newspaper might conceivably over time challenge its readership with consideration of the ethics of abortion. Perhaps this is desirable. However, in the real world of journalism, this is not practical. To examine this as an ethical problem risks splitting the newspaper's readership and perhaps the editorial board of *The Globe and Mail* as well. To examine the issue ethically is a high-powered intellectual task and, while this is certainly within the capacity of the editorial board of *The Globe and Mail*, it is difficult to explain in mun-

dane, commonsense terms. It is difficult to present ethical issues as natural; a consideration of matters ethically often leads one to think. According to Chibnall (1977), one job of the press, and hence of *The Globe and Mail*, is to alleviate the need for further reflection and action by the reader. Thus there is little merit in stirring the ethical pot and much merit in freezing it.

We see *The Globe and Mail* as guiding its readership to a "moderate" policy, one with a potentially and gradually shifting centre. This policy would have abortion equally available across Canada but dependent on committees drawn from medical elites, thereby maintaining professional control of the issue. As women enter the professional elites in greater numbers they would play a greater role in the committees.

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APPENDIX

Editorials Selected from *The Globe and Mail*
on the Topic of Abortion, 1977-1986

1. Feb. 28, '78 A Little Too Far
2. Mar. 23, '78 Conscience as Coercion
3. Jun. 29, '78 Access to Abortion
4. Jul. 18, '78 By Ignorance to Abortion
5. Feb. 22, '80 For Children's Rights
6. Jun. 09, '81 Interpretation Pending
7. Dec. 19, '81 Too Sheltered
8. Jan. 22, '82 The Care Before Birth
9. Jun. 18, '83 Life and Death
10. Oct. 21, '83 Premature Verdict
11. Feb. 22, '84 Thoroughly Modern
12. Jul. 21, '84 The Fertility Battle
13. Jul. 28, '84 And So Say All of Us
14. Aug. 13, '84 Read Agenda Mislaid
15. Nov. 09, '84 Abortion Acquittal
16. Nov. 14, '84 A Free Standing Option
17. Dec. 01, '84 Case of Extremism
18. Dec. 06, '84 In the Public Interest
19. Dec. 21, '84 Double Jeopardy
20. Jan. 22, '85 Menace
21. Mar. 13, '85 Religion and Menace
22. May 15, '85 Low Countries Jeer
23. May 16, '85 On the Rock of Ages
24. Jul. 24, '85 Fund for Elbow Room
25. Jul. 30, '85 Offensive Protest
26. Aug. 28, '85 All for Civil Dissent
27. Sep. 16, '85 Caution for a Citizen
28. Oct. 02, '85 Applying the Law
29. Oct. 03, '85 The State of the Clinic
30. Jan. 28, '86 Immoderate Minority
31. Feb. 07, '86 The Work of a Lawyer
32. Feb. 12, '86 An Odd Acquittal
33. Feb. 17, '86 Us and It
34. Apr. 12, '86 Taking Precautions
35. Feb. 28, '86 The Patient Pawns
36. Apr. 29, '86 The Targets They Pick
37. Jul. 03, '86 Blackboard Politics
38. Sep. 02, '86 Politics of Birth Control
39. Sep. 26, '86 Staying the Charges
40. Sep. 30, '86 The Boycott Brigade