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TRINITY COLLEGE
ABORTION COVERAGE IN A POLARIZED AMERICA: A CONTENT
ANALYSIS OF CNN, FOX AND MSNBC

BY:
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC POLICY AND LAW
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Abstract

Partisan media news networks are increasingly prevalent in the United States. They have infiltrated nightly news, significantly heightened partisan polarization, and impacted public opinion. In this thesis, I explore the ways in which different primetime cable news shows discuss abortion. I conduct a content analysis of transcripts from randomly selected CNN, Fox, and MSNBC primetime shows in order to identify the major themes in the coverage as well as the differences across networks. My analysis shows substantial opposition towards abortion among Fox News' hosts and guests while CNN and MSNBC's reportage was more supportive of a woman's right to choose. Using the results from this content analysis as a guide, I conclude by offering recommendations for Democratic or abortion access supporters in how to change abortion coverage in the United States in order to influence public policy and public opinion.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter 1: An Overview of Partisan Media and Polarization in the US	8
Chapter 2: Women’s Issues in the News	24
Chapter 3: Methods – Content Analysis and Results/Discussion	40
Chapter 4: Summary, Shortcomings, Recommendations and Conclusion	78
Bibliography	86

Introduction

News organizations closely cover highly partisan issues and they often serve as a topic of debate for news anchors, journalists, commentators, and political analysts on television. In an effort to better understand the impact of news coverage on partisanship, I will explore ways in which news media sources, including Fox, CNN and MSNBC, cover a controversial women's issue. Specifically, I will evaluate how these sources discuss abortion.

The news media has the power to shape public opinion and policymaking.¹ It also has an effect on party identification and the way one will vote in elections.² What may be less obvious are the ways in which the news covers women's issues and the role it may play in impacting issues of importance to women as well as perpetuating gender bias. The way the news frames stories about women and women's-oriented issues is crucial to understanding why some news sources are so polarizing. The frequency and rhetoric in the coverage impacts the way the public views these issues and how important they perceive them to be. The public perceives women's issues through the lens of their trusted news source, which may be impacted by the partisan perspective of the news organization. Is there a relationship between different networks and the way in which they talk about certain women's issues and policies? I will study this question, as well as consider the consequences of it. First, it is important to note the effect language can have on a debate like abortion.

Language is an important tool in convincing people of one point of view or turning them against another.³ It is an extremely important part of the abortion debate and we see many

¹ Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan, "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122, no. 3 (August 1, 2007): 1187–1234, <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.122.3.1187>.

² DellaVigna and Kaplan.

³ Hannah Armitage, "Political Language, Uses and Abuses," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 29, no. 1 (2010): 15–35.

examples of the role of language, rhetoric, and framing on news media coverage of abortion. Matt Bai explained in *The New York Times Magazine* that the challenge is to frame the debate in a way that resonates in the culture by “choosing the language to define a debate and, more important, with fitting individual issues into the context of broader story lines.”⁴ Discourse theory also helps us to understand the overall effect that the news has on public opinion. It demonstrates “how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created in the first place and how they are maintained and held in place over time.”⁵ Discourse theorists argue that words do not have intrinsic meaning, but that their surrounding contexts inform their meaning. This type of interpretation and analysis is significant to this project. I argue that the context of the partisan news networks impacts the way their audience understands their language. According to discourse analysts, discourse both reflects and creates human beings “world views.”⁶ Networks like CNN, Fox and MSNBC frame the debate and interpretation of abortion issues which also shapes individuals’ world views.

In order to better understand the relationship between partisan media’s language and the abortion debate, I will perform a content analysis of the coverage of abortion on CNN, Fox News and MSNBC. I will analyze each source’s coverage of abortion from 2011-2020 during their primetime shows. I will also evaluate the way in which hosts and guests on each network talk about abortion and analyze the relationship to study the effect of partisan bias in news coverage. I attempt to present a comprehensive picture of the way in which these three networks cover abortion. I aim to demonstrate how hosts and guests on specific shows use different, partisan

⁴ Armitage.

⁵ Armitage.

⁶ Armitage.

language. In light of my findings, I will then offer my own conclusions and recommendations for journalists and Democratic activists.

This thesis will proceed as follows. Before turning to my content analysis, I will include in chapter 1 an overview of polarization in the United States, an explanation of motivated reasoning, and issues of (dis)trust in the news. I will also include a discussion of media priming and framing as related to issues like racial profiling, immigration, and climate change. It is important to understand the history of polarization to grasp how partisan media can contribute to a polarized America. While my analysis specifically looks at abortion, other studies have identified how the media frames a variety of issues. This is why I include several seemingly unrelated topics; however, they are all examples demonstrating the role the media plays in framing policy issues.

In chapter 2, I will discuss issues related to women in the news, rather than the general issues examined in chapter 1. I will review news coverage of women in politics and as candidates, violence against women, and finally move to abortion. As for abortion, I will include other analyses that have studied the language used to discuss the issue and draw on other studies to explain how it shapes public opinion. This chapter will provide further evidence that the news presents women differently than their male counterparts. By touching on other reports regarding abortion, I will show abortion is a widely studied, important topic that is relevant in politics and society.

In chapter 3, I outline the methods of my content analysis. This includes a discussion of how and what I coded in each news transcript. I will also provide a full list of the codes I developed, including the categories and sub-categories that I used for each network and each host. Then I will present the results and discussion of my analysis, including first each of the

three news networks broken down by coding category. I will note my most important findings for each category by network, before highlighting my key findings comparing all three networks. In combining all three networks, I have generated several tables displaying some key findings, also included in this section. I find the hosts and guests on Fox to be the least supportive of abortion rights, and the most likely to reference the rights of the unborn child. I find all three networks refer to abortion as a controversial and political topic.

Lastly, in chapter 4 I will provide a brief summary of my thesis, discuss some of its shortcomings, make recommendations for further research, and end with concluding remarks. The recommendations are for Democratic activists and news networks, and they include inter-political party conversations, separation of party and policy, and scientific back-up of statements.

I will now begin chapter 1 by explaining how partisan media can contribute to polarization, which is ultimately the main reason I conducted this thesis: to understand at least one layer of partisan media's effect on the public discussion of abortion.

Chapter 1: Partisan Media, Polarization, and Related Issues

While there may be multiple interpretations of the term “partisan media,” the relevant definition for this thesis will be “opinionated media: outlets and programs that fit the news within a political narrative and create a coherent conservative or liberal interpretation of the day’s events.”⁷ These programs tend to engage in a biased story selection and report more heavily on topics that favor their side, while less frequently touching on the other side.⁸ These one-sided views give the audience an easily digestible version of an otherwise confusing political world.⁹ The audience for these partisan programs has grown larger in recent years, amplifying its effect, while the audience for nightly broadcast news is diminishing.¹⁰ While the partisan media audience is still small, it is an engaged and intensely partisan audience, who will make their preferences known.¹¹ The power of a group is not limited to its size in a political system like the United States, but rather its motivation and force.¹² Nonetheless, this data suggests the increase in audience size is likely to keep growing.¹³ Matching news to partisan predispositions makes the already-polarized even more polarized and increases the ideological gap between liberals and conservatives.

Partisan media programs have become increasingly prevalent in recent years, posing a tremendous change in America’s political landscape.¹⁴ While America’s constitutional system with its multiple veto points and separation of powers requires compromise, Americans are no

⁷ Matthew Levendusky, “Partisan Media Exposure and Attitudes Toward the Opposition,” *Political Communication* 30, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 565–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.737435>.

⁸ Levendusky.

⁹ Levendusky.

¹⁰ Levendusky.

¹¹ Levendusky.

¹² Levendusky.

¹³ Matthew S. Levendusky, “Why Do Partisan Media Polarize Viewers?,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013): 611–23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12008>.

¹⁴ Matthew Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

longer willing to do so.¹⁵ If citizens refuse to hear other sides and avoid differing viewpoints, their beliefs may be hardened and they may be less inclined to achieve consensus.¹⁶ This makes it unnecessarily difficult for the nation to solve problems and Americans and politicians are increasingly reluctant to compromise.¹⁷ Matthew Levendusky, in his book *How Partisan Media Polarize America*, finds exposure to partisan media contributes to the difficulty of governing.¹⁸ He explains how these outlets make citizens more extreme, more polarized and less willing to trust and compromise with those around them who do not share their partisan identity.¹⁹ While it is not true that everyone watches these shows habitually, those who do watch are more involved and engaged politically, increasing the effects of these programs.

With this overview of partisan media in mind, I will next transition into discussing the history of polarization in America, and how voting habits have become progressively more in line with one's party identification. I will then explain motivated reasoning and "The Hostile Media Effect" and how they contribute to the polarizing effects of the partisan media I will look at in my content analysis. Next, I will explain news trust and distrust by the public and its influence on one-sided views. I will then provide an example of a study that examines Fox and MSNBC, and their effect on the 2000 election. Finally, I provide examples of media priming and framing as well as define these terms, pointing to related studies about issues such as racial profiling, immigration, and climate change in the news.

¹⁵ Levendusky.

¹⁶ Levendusky.

¹⁷ Levendusky.

¹⁸ Levendusky.

¹⁹ Levendusky.

Polarization

Polarization has a significant impact in American politics at both the elite and public level and it is further heightened due to partisan media. Polarization can be defined as “the condition of hyper partisan/ideological extremism, policy representational imbalance, and institutional paralysis” and as a “rejection of reasoned compromise”.²⁰ These imbalances work together to create dysfunction as a driving force in our political system. Polarization is, in part, an unintended effect of partisan media. The public engages in selective exposure that reinforces and strengthens previously held opinions.²¹ Polarization has continued to evolve and grow simultaneously with partisan media in both intensity and emotions. While amplifying the left-right divide, it has made mutually satisfactory outcomes nearly impossible and created more difficulty in achieving new public policy.

The growth of American polarization began in the 1980s when the “revolutionaries” attacked Democrats in the House and their debates turned increasingly bitter.²² This disequilibrium has carried on since and continues to intensify. Parties in Congress have become increasingly divided and oppose each other more frequently and more consistently over time.²³ Similarly, evaluations of opposing parties have diverged, with members of each party rating the other more negatively than ever before.²⁴ Voting habits also correlate more closely now than before to an individual’s party identification.²⁵ Party identification has become a greater indicator of voting decisions since the 1970s and is now an obvious predictor for how one will

²⁰ William J. Crotty, “Polarized Politics: The Impact of Divisiveness in the US Political System” (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2015).

²¹ Maxwell McCombs et al., *The News and Public Opinion: Media Effects on Civic Life* (Polity, 2011).

²² Crotty, “Polarized Politics.”

²³ Markus Prior, “Media and Political Polarization,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (May 10, 2013): 101–27, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242>.

²⁴ Prior.

²⁵ Prior.

vote.²⁶ Researchers have found that some American voters even change their opinions on certain issues to make them consistent with their party identification.²⁷

Relatedly, the correlation between party identification and political ideology remains higher among more politically engaged people.²⁸ It seems that the more passionate one is about politics, the more polarized one becomes. Some scholars have found the correlation between party identification and ideology to be considerably higher for more politically knowledgeable individuals.²⁹ John Evans finds that “the politically active are becoming more polarized – and particularly polarized on the most political of matters, feelings towards liberals and conservatives.”³⁰ This ideological distance between Republican and Democrat “activists” – as defined as the 20% of House voters who report engaging in multiple political activities such as working for a candidate or donating money – has increased significantly more than the distance between partisan House voters who are not as politically engaged.³¹ This demonstrates certain people are more polarized due to their engagement with politics, compared to those who are not active participants in political affairs. It is the “activists” that work endlessly to make a case for their side, whether it be Democrat or Republican, by going out and voting in larger numbers, donating higher amounts to campaigns, and generally being more involved in promoting their party’s efforts.³² As a result, polarization can also significantly impact elections, especially primaries.

²⁶ Prior.

²⁷ Prior.

²⁸ Prior.

²⁹ Prior.

³⁰ John H. Evans, “Have Americans’ Attitudes Become More Polarized?—An Update*,” *Social Science Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2003): 71–90, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6237.8401005>.

³¹ Prior, “Media and Political Polarization.”

³² Prior.

Motivated Reasoning

Why does partisan media have such a strong and polarizing impact on the public? Various studies have offered motivated reasoning as a rationale for why partisan media is so polarizing to individuals.³³ Humans are motivated reasoners who hope for accuracy when consuming news, but also desire their preferred conclusion, one that supports their existing beliefs.³⁴ The processing of information to make it fit with our existing beliefs is called motivated reasoning. For example, one hears a story on the news about Obama, and all of one's preexisting beliefs about the former president come to mind without deliberate thought. These feelings shape how one interprets the evidence in that specific news story. Obama's supporters will likely believe a story that frames him as competent, while his critics will dismiss the story as biased, or in this case "liberal".³⁵

While news media surely distribute news in partisan manners, individuals also play a significant role due to motivated reasoning. One who consistently watches Fox News may likely believe CNN's content is liberal-biased and off-base, like in the Obama example (and vice versa). Conservatives often accuse the "mainstream" media of crafting "fake news," meaning liberals and moderates make up the news they report. This speaks to the evident lack of trust between the two leading parties.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of people have news outlets that they watch consistently or that they rely on to seek out like-minded information.³⁶ Among these news sources, there is little overlap in what people think they can turn to and trust for their news and they will uncritically

³³ Levendusky, "Why Do Partisan Media Polarize Viewers?"

³⁴ Levendusky.

³⁵ Levendusky.

³⁶ Levendusky.

accept a certain source's claims.³⁷ Absent any competing message, this general tendency to accept pro-attitudinal information becomes even stronger.³⁸ Lacking a counterargument of any dimension is more persuasive and these individuals have agreed with the show hosts on their televisions before, so they do not question them.³⁹ Clearly, the bias lies not only in the anchors and distributors, but in the consumers as well.

This theory of consumers believing the news is biased against their beliefs is called the "Hostile Media Effect." The "Hostile Media Effect," quite similar to motivated reasoning, was a theory first explored in 1985 that found partisans were especially prone to thinking the political media was biased against them.⁴⁰ Scholars like Richard Perloff have studied this theory alongside other changes, including the growth of partisan media, accompanied by selective exposure to media on the part of strong partisans, the advent of social media, and rising polarization in America.⁴¹ He argues that the hostile media effect remains relevant in explaining the media and political environment today.⁴² This partisan selective exposure leads to overconfidence in one's party.⁴³ Exposure to only one side of every story causes people to not only avoid challenging their own beliefs, but to avoid listening to any opinions that contradict their beliefs. This leads to hostility toward the opposing sides and increased polarization.⁴⁴

³⁷ Levendusky.

³⁸ Levendusky.

³⁹ Levendusky.

⁴⁰ Alison Dagnes, *Super Mad at Everything All the Time*, Springer, 2019, <https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-030-06131-9.pdf>.

⁴¹ Richard M. Perloff, "A Three-Decade Retrospective on the Hostile Media Effect," *Mass Communication and Society* 18, no. 6 (November 2, 2015): 701–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1051234>.

⁴² Perloff.

⁴³ Dagnes.

⁴⁴ Dagnes.

News Trust and Distrust

Another important issue related to media and polarization is the rise in the public's distrust of the media. Evidence suggests that partisan polarization has increasingly impacted people's trust in media sources in the past five years.⁴⁵ One study by the Pew Research Center finds that Republicans have grown increasingly alienated from most of the more established sources, while Democrats' confidence in them remains stable and has strengthened in some cases.⁴⁶ The study asked about use of, trust in, and distrust of 30 different news sources for political and election news.⁴⁷ Higher numbers of Republicans than Democrats expressed distrust in 20 of the 30 sources asked about. Conversely, Democrats expressed trust in 22 of 30 news sources asked about. In effect, Republicans have lower trust in a variety of news sources, and only one source, Fox News, was used by at least one-third of Republicans for political and election news during a given week.⁴⁸ Democrats, on the other hand, tended to receive their news from five different sources in the same week.⁴⁹ This demonstrates the clear party divide in the United States and the role partisan media may play. It also gives context to this thesis, as party preference may affect the way in which news sources discuss an important women's issue, abortion. If members of a political party rely heavily on one news source, they may be exposed to only one partisan viewpoint as well.

Fox News and MSNBC

In order to consider the role of the media, especially partisan media, we need to better understand the trajectories of both Fox News and MSNBC. Fox News station was created to

⁴⁵ Mark Jurkowitz et al., "U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided," *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project* (blog), January 24, 2020, <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>.

⁴⁶ Jurkowitz et al.

⁴⁷ Jurkowitz et al.

⁴⁸ Jurkowitz et al.

⁴⁹ Jurkowitz et al.

appeal to the specific audience of conservatives in the United States. Fox News' choice of which stories to cover and how to frame them reflect their own conservative ideology.⁵⁰ They have established a very loyal audience of Republicans by providing a platform to reinforce the conservative agenda. In his study, Jonathan Morris found Fox consumers have a distinct voting pattern, political attitudes, and view of reality.⁵¹ He also found viewers of Fox News to be less informed on certain issues than other news viewers.⁵² An example he includes is viewers of Fox underestimated the number of American casualties in the Iraq War and were less likely to follow stories critical of the Bush administration.⁵³ A separate article written by Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay and Evan Lewis also evaluated misperceptions about the Iraq War, and concluded the Fox audience had the highest average rate of misperceptions about the war.⁵⁴ These studies suggest the clear Republican slant that exists on Fox News, and how it affects viewers' interpretations.

In quantifying the impact of Fox News on the 2000 election, DellaVigna and Kaplan found that the news outlet had a significant effect. The pair assembled a new panel of town-level data on federal elections and matched it with town-level data on cable programming. They compared the change in Republican vote share between 1996 and 2000 for towns where Fox News entered the cable market by 2000 with those towns where it had not.⁵⁵ Their main result was that Fox had a significant impact on the 2000 elections. Fox News increased the Republican

⁵⁰ McCombs et al., *The News and Public Opinion*.

⁵¹ McCombs et al.

⁵² McCombs et al.

⁵³ McCombs et al.

⁵⁴ "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War - KULL - 2003 - Political Science Quarterly - Wiley Online Library," accessed May 11, 2021, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2003.tb00406.x?casa_token=vcbA-bxOOAoAAAAA:N-p0eyQ2UvhD7dMVnO6pE4sbUrBvboCvpi1FbxS2lHkcvslZ_yZN4oUkzHwMdm2RcrSe2mF2XTzd0ZsZdw&utm_campaign=article&utm_medium=link&utm_source=www.mazavr.tk

⁵⁵ DellaVigna and Kaplan, "The Fox News Effect."

vote share in presidential elections by 0.4 to 0.7 percentage points.⁵⁶ Because Fox News in 2000 was available in about 35% of households, the impact was estimated to be 0.15 to 0.2 percentage points, or 200,000 votes nationwide. While the vote shift of about 200,000 votes is small, it is still likely to have been decisive in a close presidential election.⁵⁷ The scholars also analyzed whether Fox News affected voting in lower-level races, including Senate races. They found that Fox increased Republican vote share for the Senate by 0.7 percentage points, suggesting a generalized ideological shift. DellaVigna and Kaplan's study also explored whether Fox News' effect on presidential elections was mainly a result of voters switching party lines or additional voter turnout.⁵⁸ They found Fox to have increased voter turnout, especially in Democratic districts. The impact of Fox News on voting patterns appears to be due to the mobilization of conservative voters in left-leaning areas. Fox convinced between 3 to 8 percent of its non-Republican viewers to vote Republican.⁵⁹ Fox News' effect is sizeable, and this has an impact on voter behavior and voter turnout. These studies demonstrate that Fox has a clear effect on public opinion.

Many would contend that Fox is not the only news source with a partisan agenda. Some other news networks are following Fox's lead and seeking their own ideological base. MSNBC became a clear opponent of Fox News during the 2008 general election season with its own brand of more liberally oriented content, such as the Rachel Maddow Show.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ DellaVigna and Kaplan.

⁵⁷ DellaVigna and Kaplan.

⁵⁸ DellaVigna and Kaplan.

⁵⁹ DellaVigna and Kaplan.

⁶⁰ McCombs et al.

Shaping Public Opinion

While public opinion can have several different facets to its definition and it has been difficult for scholars to agree on one, for the purpose of this thesis I will use Maxwell McCombs' separated definition of "public" and "opinion". Public can be defined as a "well-defined group with clear boundaries that actively engages in discourse about the major issues affecting the group."⁶¹ A reasonable goal of a public is to establish consensus that allows for various decision-making processes to advance, while keeping the group intact over the long term.⁶² The notion of consensus speaks to the concept of opinion, which exists both within individuals who are part of a broader public and at the broader social level of the public.⁶³ Public opinion can be broadly defined as "the collective consensus about political and civic matters, reached by groups within larger communities."⁶⁴ The public consists of individuals who communicate with one another about debatable topics. Our opinions reflect what we wish to communicate to others about our stances on these topics.⁶⁵

News is capable of influencing central democratic outcomes such as political knowledge. It is also possible it can influence its viewers' feelings toward a wide spectrum of political objects, from branches of government to pieces of legislation.⁶⁶ Public opinion is most closely related to citizens' attitudes and behaviors. While the news affects public opinion and voting habits, it also impacts other civic behaviors such as one's likelihood of volunteering for a political campaign. This can be consequential for the way the public perceives certain issues, including women's issues.

⁶¹ McCombs et al.

⁶² McCombs et al.

⁶³ McCombs et al.

⁶⁴ McCombs et al.

⁶⁵ McCombs et al.

⁶⁶ McCombs et al.

It is clear the news has various goals in its delivery. The information can be gathered and organized in order to express a specific perspective, and these strategic pieces of information shape the relevant audience's opinions.⁶⁷ While this is an obvious effect of the news media, there are other unintended effects that are important to decipher. An example of a less obvious effect of the news is widening the knowledge gap between persons with high and low socioeconomic statuses. Individuals with higher socioeconomic status tend to consume more news, increasing the gap in political knowledge between higher and lower socioeconomic Americans.⁶⁸ Another unintended effect of news media relates back to polarization among the audiences. Individuals who partake in selective exposure and only listen to one side of an issue become overly confident in their opinions. This can reduce others, who fear their opinions may not be part of the majority or are not confident enough to speak on them, to silence in group conversations or debates.⁶⁹ While the explicit effects of news media on public opinion are crucial, the unintended consequences are important to note as well. I will end my first chapter by explaining the role of priming and framing in the news and a few other issues that, similar to women's issues, can be greatly affected by media priming or framing.

Media Priming and Framing

Media priming and framing both play a role in how stereotypes are activated and maintained in a viewer's mind.⁷⁰ Media priming, specifically, is the idea that when a viewer is exposed to a certain stimulus, this stimulus primes the viewer to think about ideas that are related to what they have just seen or heard.⁷¹ Media framing refers to selecting and emphasizing certain

⁶⁷ McCombs et al.

⁶⁸ McCombs et al.

⁶⁹ McCombs et al.

⁷⁰ Kelsey Foreman, Cecilia Arteaga, and Aushawna Collins, "The Role of Media Framing in Crime Reports: How Different Types of News Frames and Racial Identity Affect Viewers' Perceptions of Race," n.d., 13.

⁷¹ Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins.

features of an issue as important while deemphasizing others.⁷² Existing research has repeatedly demonstrated the way priming and framing can be used in news coverage of racial matters. I will next describe some of the extant research in this area in order to consider how priming and framing may impact my own study on partisan news coverage of abortion. I will then continue the discussion into two other issue areas – immigration and climate change.

Race and Crime Stereotyping

Racialized stereotypes are prevalent in the news media, especially in recent years. With this, biased information pertaining to race becomes ‘common knowledge’ to the public. Constant exposure to biased information about certain groups such as women, immigrants, or minorities, leads to adjusted perceptions and judgments of these groups.⁷³ Racial minorities are especially subject to this judgment, as various studies suggest exposure to racial stereotypes in the media influences interactions with members of these groups.⁷⁴ News reports often pair stories of drugs, poverty, and crime with photos of black people, creating or activating stereotypes in viewers’ minds. This is an example of media priming; news coverage offering visuals of black men associated with negative actions and illegal behaviors.

Media framing elicits a similar effect as priming, as it can affect people’s perceptions of certain groups. Speaking about crime specifically, news media has the ability to shape public opinion of the crime as well as the suspect. A study found messages framed in an accusatory way increase the likelihood a viewer would perceive the suspect as guilty, even if it is not proven.⁷⁵ Another study compared news stories featuring black or white suspects and found that stories

⁷² Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins.

⁷³ Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins.

⁷⁴ Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins.

⁷⁵ Anita Atwell Seate, Jake Harwood, and Erin Blecha, “‘He Was Framed!’ Framing Criminal Behavior in Sports News,” *Communication Research Reports* 27, no. 4 (November 4, 2010): 343–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2010.518917>.

featuring black suspects were less likely to include sound bites from their defense, suggesting the black suspects' guilt.⁷⁶

Foreman et al. were interested in how different media frames affect viewers' perceptions of the suspect's race.⁷⁷ They look at a sympathetic frame, which incorporates the mental health history of a suspect and assumes the suspect is innocent or states the accused crime is out of character. Next, they look at a scrutinizing frame, which brings up prior criminal history and assumes the suspect is guilty or does not mention family or personal background.⁷⁸ They found the scrutinizing frame overall produced more blame for the suspect and negative attitudes towards the suspect's race.⁷⁹ I would expect to find a similar relationship in my content analysis: The more negative coverage that issues like abortion receive, the less likely viewers will be to support it.

Immigration in the News

While the purpose of my project is to argue that the media shapes public opinion on abortion, many other policy issues are subjected to media framing. One such area that media framing plays an important role is immigration. The different frames individuals are exposed to on immigration shape the way they perceive particular policies, affecting undocumented immigrants, and the policy process as well. People have an array of choices when it comes to what type of news they consume and their exposure to immigration policies varies depending on news outlet that they view.⁸⁰ Media studies tend to focus on the racialization of immigration, while policy research focuses on whether immigration should be increased, decreased, or kept

⁷⁶ Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins, "The Role of Media Framing in Crime Reports."

⁷⁷ Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins.

⁷⁸ Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins.

⁷⁹ Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins.

⁸⁰ Chris Haynes, Jennifer Merolla, and S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, *Framing Immigrants: News Coverage, Public Opinion, and Policy* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2016).

the same in the United States.⁸¹ The news media often omits the particularities of policy and expresses underdeveloped opinions on immigration.⁸² The media shapes public opinion for a multitude different groups and policies, including immigrants.

A study that assessed the relationship between *New York Times* coverage of immigration and white partisanship over the last three decades finds that negative framing on immigration is associated with shifts toward the Republican Party – the Party linked with anti-immigrant positions.⁸³ This study highlights the potential role of the media to induce shifts in partisan identification. As these shifts could alter the partisan balance of power in American politics, the researchers focused on media coverage of immigration and assessed the impact of that coverage on aggregate white partisanship.⁸⁴ There is growing evidence that media coverage of immigration presents the issue in a negative light, resulting in aggregate effects on public opinion. For example, media often present an “immigrant threat” narrative that ties immigration to economic burden, social dysfunction, illegality, and cultural demise.⁸⁵ The connotation of immigration as threatening can significantly sway an individual’s policy preference, especially in the aftermath of tragedies like terrorist attacks. In these cases, individuals are more likely to support conservative viewpoints and policies, linking the Republican Party with more negative views on immigration.⁸⁶ Previous survey research in a study by Steven Kull et al., reported an association between Fox News consumption and misconceptions about the Iraq war.⁸⁷ Kull et al. examined the relationship between the holding of misperceptions and respondents’ primary news

⁸¹ Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan.

⁸² Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan.

⁸³ Marisa A. Abrajano, Zoltan Hajnal, and Hans J. G. Hassell, “Media Framing and Partisan Identity: The Case of Immigration Coverage and White Macropartisanship,” *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 2, no. 1 (March 2017): 5–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2016.25>.

⁸⁴ Abrajano et al.

⁸⁵ Abrajano et al.

⁸⁶ Abrajano et al.

⁸⁷ Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis, “Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War,”

source, as well as the relationship between attention to news and the level of misperceptions.⁸⁸ A variety of possible misperceptions could justify going to war with Iraq, and if Americans believed that the United States had found weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq or that Iraq was supporting Al Qaeda, they may have seen the war as justified as self-defense even without UN approval.⁸⁹ The article stresses that people do not develop misperceptions on their own, but rather the press transmits certain information and provides critical analysis.⁹⁰ This means one's source of news and how closely one pays attention to the news influences whether or how misperceptions manifest.⁹¹ This relationship between the Republican Party and negative views toward immigration is relevant to my own research question and provides potential insights into how news coverage impacts women's policy issues, specifically abortion.

Climate Change in the News

Another policy issue news coverage substantially affects is climate change policy. This is a policy issue that receives differing coverage based on the news outlet's political perspective. Researchers have previously conducted studies evaluating climate change coverage in the news media. In one content analysis, Feldman et al. analyzed Fox, CNN and MSNBC during 2007-2008. They found CNN and MSNBC both provided a depiction of climate change consistent with scientific opinion. Conversely, Fox adopted a more dismissive tone toward climate change and interviewed a greater ratio of climate change doubters to believers.⁹² Fox, however, also covered it more frequently, amplifying doubt within the news platform.⁹³ Fox News viewers are

⁸⁸ Kull et al.

⁸⁹ Kull et al.

⁹⁰ Kull et al.

⁹¹ Kull et al.

⁹² Lauren Feldman et al., "Climate on Cable: The Nature and Impact of Global Warming Coverage on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 3-31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161211425410>.

⁹³ Feldman et al.

less likely to accept global warming, while the opposite is true for CNN and MSNBC viewers. Republicans' viewpoints seem to reflect the news outlet they choose to watch, while Democrats do not differ significantly in their beliefs based on their preferred cable news channel. These findings about climate change and global warming only add to a growing body of work that shows the power of news in shaping public opinion and attitudes. I expect these findings will be consistent with my own research, with Fox News covering abortion in a more negative way than CNN and MSNBC.

The way the news media frames stories and primes their audience can create or reinforce existing political bias. This bias is present in media coverage of racial minorities, immigration, climate change, and many more topics. Likewise, some news media organizations, like Fox or MSNBC, were developed from an explicit partisan or ideological perspective. Media bias matters for many reasons, however, its power to shape or influence public opinion is of particular consequence. This thesis will continue to explore these questions through women's issues, in particular, abortion coverage. In the next chapter, I will provide in-depth evidence on women and the news, including a discussion of existing framing of women's issues. The issues I will address are women in politics or women as candidates, violence against women and, of course, abortion. By first accounting for gendered issues only indirectly correlated with abortion, I will provide background showing how the news has previously covered women's issues. By reviewing other studies that have been completed on abortion, I show there is a widely debated dialogue surrounding it, to which I am adding to with my own content analysis.

Chapter 2: Women's Issues in the Media

This section first focuses on specific women's issues that the news media has habitually slanted in partisan ways. Female representation differs greatly from males', especially when it comes to running for office. I explore the way the news has previously covered women as candidates and violence against women, concluding that there are discrepancies in discussions about them versus their male opponents.

The second section of this chapter transitions to the topic I analyze in my content analysis: abortion. I explain previous studies that have discussed language around abortion as well as its portrayal in the news.

Female Representation in the News

Women are clearly underrepresented in American political news. However, it is the root of this underrepresentation we seek to understand. Is it gender bias or stereotypes that cause broadcast news to overlook women? Or are there other underlying issues? Baitinger investigates two competing hypotheses to address these questions. She looks into whether gender bias or journalistic norms, meaning their inclination to rely on sources with high-profile careers and expertise in issue areas that are newsworthy, fuel this discrepancy.⁹⁴ To do this, she recorded every guest who appeared on the Sunday morning political talk shows from 2009-2011, including political journalists, activists, candidates for office, and representatives from foreign governments.⁹⁵ Baitinger uses her original data set to determine whether certain characteristics explain why women's voices remain a small percentage of conversations on the news. She finds little support for bias and stereotyping as explanations for women's underrepresentation in the

⁹⁴ Gail Baitinger, "Fair and Gender Balanced? Uncovering the Roots of Women's Under-Representation as Political News Sources" (Ph.D., United States -- District of Columbia, American University, 2016), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1825633889/abstract/CA2194B679A433FPQ/1>.

⁹⁵ Baitinger.

media.⁹⁶ Her findings confirm that women of seven different political professions are less likely than men to appear as guests, however, the results also show that the gender gap does not result from overt bias.⁹⁷ Rather, the characteristics that contribute to repeated appearances on Sunday morning shows are consistent with journalistic norms to find the most newsworthy sources.⁹⁸ Norms perpetuate a gendered news environment still, considering there are so few women in the positions and professions from which most sources are selected.⁹⁹ The characteristics that do predict appearances on Sunday shows mean that women are at a disadvantage, as they are less likely than men to hold what is considered “newsworthy” positions, they are a minority in Congress, have less extreme voting records than male counterparts, and rarely serve as congressional leaders.¹⁰⁰

While Baitinger concludes that women’s underrepresentation is not a result of overt bias, this is not her only important finding. Baitinger also examined the specific topics the Sunday morning news programs discussed. Women were more likely to be invited to speak on issues like childcare and women’s health while male guests tend to be asked more about economics, crime and national defense.¹⁰¹ Women have less opportunity to discuss the latter issues, which reinforces stereotypes about their interests. Their opinions often are omitted from the public debate about important political issues. With Baitinger’s findings about the underrepresentation of women as news sources in mind, it is crucial to now explore whether this is reflective of media coverage of women as political candidates as well.

⁹⁶ Baitinger.

⁹⁷ Baitinger.

⁹⁸ Baitinger.

⁹⁹ Baitinger.

¹⁰⁰ Baitinger.

¹⁰¹ Deborah Alexander and Kristi Andersen, “Gender as a Factor in the Attribution of Leadership Traits,” *Political Research Quarterly - POLIT RES QUART* 46 (September 1, 1993): 527–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591299304600305>.

Media Coverage of Women in Politics

Female Elected Officials and the News

As more and more women get elected, it is important to look at the news coverage of female elected officials once they are in office. Lauren Bryant, in her content analysis examining the differences in news coverage of male and female governors, found several interesting results. The coverage was pretty neutral between male and female governors when it focused on the discussion of policy issue.¹⁰² It was when the discussions diverged from these prescribed journalistic standards that prevent journalists from using blatant gender stereotypes in their coverage, that differences were found.¹⁰³ Female governors, unsurprisingly, received less news article coverage overall, less prominently placed coverage, and more opinion-oriented coverage than male governors.¹⁰⁴ In terms of quality, news coverage of women governors tended to be more negative and less likely to focus on policy issues.¹⁰⁵ Their coverage was more likely to contain personal, gendered, and strategy frames than the coverage of their male counterparts, and the overall patterns of gender bias were evident.¹⁰⁶ Bryant analyzes specific campaigns to prove male and female candidates are on an uneven political playing field, and describe how the news media activates stereotyped gender roles.

¹⁰² Lauren Bryant, "Gender Balanced or Gender Biased? An Examination of News Coverage of Male and Female Governors" (Ph.D., United States -- New York, State University of New York at Albany, 2014), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1536397706/abstract/D95AC90ACED947F8PQ/1>.

¹⁰³ Bryant.

¹⁰⁴ Bryant.

¹⁰⁵ Bryant.

¹⁰⁶ Bryant.

Female Candidates and News

In senatorial and presidential campaigns, male candidates also receive more coverage than female ones.¹⁰⁷ An example of this occurred in 1999 when Elizabeth Dole ran for the Republican presidential nomination. She received less coverage than her male opponents, George W. Bush and John McCain, and was less likely to be included in the front page than them as well.¹⁰⁸ Despite the evidence indicating that women receive less coverage than men, other studies have found more equal news media coverage in these types of elections, suggesting the coverage is not as gendered as we may think.¹⁰⁹ For example, research by Bode and Hennings shows little evidence of differential coverage in terms of quantity.¹¹⁰ They found vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin received more coverage than her male counterpart, Joseph Biden, in 2008.¹¹¹ Bryant explains regardless of this research, the equitable coverage identified in these cases could actually be the result of a woman running for a male dominated position, like U.S. president.¹¹² In this case, this would mean they are often the “first” women to run for such a high position; this then leads to more articles being written about them and a general public interest in their business.¹¹³ Therefore, the parity found in the quantity of coverage does not necessarily indicate the coverage of female candidates is becoming more balanced.¹¹⁴ In order to determine if gender based patterns of coverage persist, it is necessary to examine the substance of coverage and if it is equal among males and females.

¹⁰⁷ Bryant.

¹⁰⁸ Bryant.

¹⁰⁹ Bryant.

¹¹⁰ Leticia Bode and Valerie M. Hennings, “Mixed Signals? Gender and the Media’s Coverage of the 2008 Vice Presidential Candidates,” *Politics & Policy* 40, no. 2 (2012): 221–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2012.00350.x>.

¹¹¹ Bryant, “Gender Balanced or Gender Biased?”

¹¹² Bryant.

¹¹³ Bryant.

¹¹⁴ Bryant.

Negative Image

While the quantity of coverage is important to consider, the substance of gendered coverage is important to understand as well. Female candidates are often portrayed as less viable than their male opponents.¹¹⁵ The news also presents them as less competitive and less aggressive than their male opponents.¹¹⁶ For example, Erica Scharrer discovered unequal news treatment of Hillary Clinton compared to Rudolph Giuliani in their 2000 race for the New York Senate.¹¹⁷ Clinton was much more likely to receive negative statements regarding her likelihood of winning against her male opponent.¹¹⁸ She was ridiculed in the press for being ill-prepared and incompetent.¹¹⁹ Another example comes from Falk's comparison of press coverage of women who have run for president from 1872-2004. He found that despite progress in women's rights and gender attitudes, their press coverage is consistently biased.¹²⁰ The news media portrayed these women as unnatural in politics, incompetent as leaders, and overall not viable candidates.¹²¹ This is important because the way the news covers women as candidates in office can influence their success at re-election, their likelihood of seeking higher political positions at the end of their terms, and the chances that other women will follow in their footsteps.¹²²

While there have been improvements in contemporary news coverage of female candidates, there still exists some issues at large. Journalists' language often either implies or explicitly states men must be aggressive and powerful while women should be moral and

¹¹⁵ Bryant.

¹¹⁶ Bryant.

¹¹⁷ Erica Scharrer, "An 'Improbable Leap': A Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of Hillary Clinton's Transition from First Lady to Senate Candidate: *Journalism Studies*," Vol 3, No 3," (December 2010): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616700220145614>.

¹¹⁸ Bryant, "Gender Balanced or Gender Biased?"

¹¹⁹ Bryant.

¹²⁰ Bryant.

¹²¹ Bryant.

¹²² Bryant.

caring.¹²³ When the media covers political candidates, men are more likely to be described in terms of their job status rather than their familial situation like women.¹²⁴ The language used to describe women candidates tends to undermine them, often including words like “pupper, beauty queen, unruly woman...”¹²⁵ The media is also more likely to use negative verbs when describing the speech of women candidates; they use such words as “attacks” or “ridicules” to describe the women’s language.¹²⁶ When journalists present information about female candidates for president, they are more likely to reference the woman’s appearance, clothing, hair, and other physical features.¹²⁷ News outlets also often explicitly offer arguments against women candidates, for example, saying they are too emotional, unable to handle crises, or concerned with trivial matters.¹²⁸ The media is less likely to report on a woman’s stance on policy issues, although women’s campaigns are actually more likely to discuss policy issues than men’s.¹²⁹ This evident discrepancy in male and female coverage as candidates speaks volumes to the discourse surrounding the perception of women, and suggests women are continuously at a disadvantage when running for candidacy. While women’s coverage as candidates is important to review, another significant issue the news media has the power to shape is violence against women.

¹²³ Jacqueline Herbers, “The Role of News Media in Constructing Gender, Politics, and the Presidency” (Ph.D., United States -- Wisconsin, Cardinal Stritch University, 2019), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2287714039/abstract/8D43EBD84C7F43F4PQ/1>.

¹²⁴ Herbers.

¹²⁵ Herbers.

¹²⁶ Herbers.

¹²⁷ Herbers.

¹²⁸ Herbers.

¹²⁹ Herbers.

Violence Against Women in the News

One measure of gender equity is the presence of violence against women in our society.¹³⁰ Violence is still a regular part of the lived experiences of a frighteningly large proportion of women in the United States.¹³¹ The World Health Organization found that 35% of women suffer violence from their partners and/or some form of sexual violence.¹³² Despite any drops in the rate of this violence over time, it persists to a troubling degree.¹³³ As violence against women is such a sensitive topic, the discussion around it on public forums should be, too. Nicholas Chagnon conducted a study about media portrayal of violence against women and accounted for rape and domestic violence in his research.

Feminist media critics argue that media coverage has perpetuated inaccurate and misleading ideas about violence against women.¹³⁴ For instance, reports will often blame women for being raped or beaten by their partners, insensitively narrating a story that is not their own.¹³⁵ Chagnon looks at coverage of rape and domestic violence in major news outlets over about two decades (1992-2013).¹³⁶ He focuses on the *New York Times*, NBC, CBS, ABC, and online coverage from Fox News and the *New York Times*.¹³⁷ Chagnon finds publicized cases of crimes against women to be occasions for public figures to decry this violence and express their support for gender equity. He also finds that not much has changed since the early 1990s in terms of how

¹³⁰ Nicholas J. Chagnon, "Violence against Women in the News: Progress without Justice" (Ph.D., United States -- Hawaii, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 2016), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1846927729/abstract/52971C61C3154467PQ/1>.

¹³¹ Chagnon.

¹³² Claudia García-Moreno et al., *Global and regional Estimates of Violence against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2013).

¹³³ Chagnon, "Violence against Women in the News."

¹³⁴ Chagnon.

¹³⁵ Chagnon.

¹³⁶ Chagnon.

¹³⁷ Chagnon.

much female violence is covered in the news. Chagnon argues that there are some representations of feminist knowledge and critiques of violence against women integrated into media coverage, however, it is only partial.¹³⁸ He stresses how news does problematize violence against women, but in a partial, de-historicized manner that ignores its persistence over time.¹³⁹ Media coverage incorporates a very limited feminist voice into the conversation about violence against women, a topic their voices should be sought out for and listened to.

Chagnon also introduces the concern of the news media's victim-blaming rhetoric.¹⁴⁰ Media reports often blame the victim in rape or domestic violence cases, and women are the victims in the vast majority of these cases.¹⁴¹ While Chagnon notes this may be becoming less common, it is still prevalent enough to be problematic. Twenty percent of articles in Chagnon's analysis of the *New York Times* feature victim blaming discourse. Victim blaming was particularly common when news media sought to provide explanations for certain violent incidents.¹⁴² Journalists often fall back to victim blaming rhetoric when explaining violence against women, an unfortunate tendency that perpetuates this problematic situation.¹⁴³ While women in politics receive inferior and less frequent coverage by news media than males and violence against women in the news adopts a victim blaming rhetoric, I believe it is safe to hypothesize that women will be underrepresented in the conversation around abortion as well. The next section will focus on studies researchers have completed on abortion in the media as well as the general discussion of the issue in political society.

¹³⁸ Chagnon.

¹³⁹ Chagnon.

¹⁴⁰ Chagnon.

¹⁴¹ Chagnon.

¹⁴² Chagnon.

¹⁴³ Chagnon.

Abortion and News Coverage

Today, abortion is an incredibly partisan issue. Despite nearly five decades passing since the *Roe v. Wade* decision, public opinion remains strongly divided on the issue. As debates around abortion garner significant news coverage, this climate grants public opinion researchers a unique opportunity in studying mass communication.¹⁴⁴

Since broadcast news has the power to shape public opinion, it is important to review how journalists present information on meaningful issues like abortion. It is a sensitive topic for some; it is highly partisan and was one of the most fiercely debated topics in U.S. public opinion over the last four decades.¹⁴⁵ The issue cuts across sex, religion, class, and ideological lines, with views nearly split down the middle.¹⁴⁶ This section includes several studies including one that interviews journalists who report on abortion and one about the language used to discuss abortion in a classroom.

In one study that investigated the process of news making on abortion and how news frames can influence public and policy agendas, Sisson et al. interviewed journalists who had experience reporting on abortion. They recruited these journalists through listservs for progressive and feminist reporters.¹⁴⁷ Overall, the journalists perceived reporting on abortion to be a difficult task.¹⁴⁸ They discussed having trouble grappling with the meaning of “neutrality” on the issue and the challenges they faced when handling editors with differing levels of

¹⁴⁴ Cory L. Armstrong and Michael P. Boyle, “Views from the Margins: News Coverage of Women in Abortion Protests, 1960–2006,” *Mass Communication and Society* 14, no. 2 (February 28, 2011): 153–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205431003615901>.

¹⁴⁵ Armstrong and Boyle.

¹⁴⁶ Armstrong and Boyle.

¹⁴⁷ Gretchen Sisson, Stephanie Herold, and Katie Woodruff, “‘The Stakes Are so High’: Interviews with Progressive Journalists Reporting on Abortion,” *Contraception* 96, no. 6 (December 1, 2017): 395–400, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.contraception.2017.08.005>.

¹⁴⁸ Sisson, Herold, and Woodruff.

knowledge about abortion.¹⁴⁹ Many of them also felt that the stakes were much higher on this issue as it is extremely divisive.¹⁵⁰ For many participants, accuracy was of greater value than traditional journalistic conceptions of neutrality, as they wondered whether journalists actually attain said “neutrality” in abortion reporting.¹⁵¹ A majority of them also reported being harassed by anti-abortion groups as a result of their work.

Shaping Public Opinion on Abortion

We have seen how broadcast news can shape public opinion. Why might this be problematic for a policy issue like abortion? Scholars have demonstrated that when viewers identify with the people in a story, it can sway both their personal opinions and political priorities.¹⁵² For the abortion issue, this is true for false depictions of decision-making about pregnancy and abortion. Mulligan and Habel found that after viewing two fictional films about pregnancy decision-making – one which framed abortion in a favorable light and one more negatively – subjects were much more likely to support legal abortion access in a greater range of circumstances after viewing the former.¹⁵³ The ways in which the news media tells abortion stories significantly impact the public’s understanding of the procedure.¹⁵⁴ The circumstances, rhetoric, and cinematic construction of the situation can create social myths, stigma, and perceived consequences for those who seek abortion.¹⁵⁵ Other studies have analyzed how certain movies cover abortion.

¹⁴⁹ Sisson, Herold, and Woodruff.

¹⁵⁰ Sisson, Herold, and Woodruff.

¹⁵¹ Sisson, Herold, and Woodruff.

¹⁵² Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport, “Telling Stories about Abortion: Abortion-Related Plots in American Film and Television, 1916–2013,” *Contraception* 89, no. 5 (May 1, 2014): 413–18, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.contraception.2013.12.015>.

¹⁵³ Kenneth Mulligan, and Philip Habel, “An Experimental Test of the Effects of Fictional Framing on Attitudes*,” *Vol. 92, No.1*, (March 2011): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42956475>.

¹⁵⁴ Sisson and Kimport, “Telling Stories about Abortion.”

¹⁵⁵ Sisson and Kimport.

Sisson and Kimport sought to further understand how American television and film portray abortion. They conducted a census of plotlines that included abortion and produced a list of all its representation in film and television.¹⁵⁶ Using online searches of movie databases, they searched for all titles tagged with “abortion” as a keyword or in the plot description. They found a growth trend in the frequency of abortion-related plotlines over time from 1916-2013.¹⁵⁷ They ultimately conclude that abortion-related plotlines occur more frequently than popular discourse assumes, and this suggests an interactive relationship between media representations, cultural attitudes and policies surrounding abortion regulation.¹⁵⁸ The study demonstrates how media framing of abortion can influence policy outcomes. Similar to broadcast news, the average person watches movies and television shows, making the two subjects important to the abortion debate. Abortion in cinema is translatable to broadcast news, where it is up to journalists to craft the rhetoric surrounding the issue.

Numerous studies have been done to measure the effect of broadcast news on public opinion. Mark Jenssen analyzes broadcast news and the effects of conservative narratives on the reproductive health debate. He points to comments officials have made, that he argues influence public opinion. He finds the impact the clearest in the platform language of the Republican and Democratic parties, who were forced to take a stance post *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, as the abortion issue was thrust into the national spotlight.¹⁵⁹ By 1980, any equivocation on the issue by either party was eliminated. Republicans’ platform became support for efforts to “restore the right to life for unborn children.”¹⁶⁰ For instance in 2012, Missouri Representative Todd Akin discussed

¹⁵⁶ Sisson and Kimport.

¹⁵⁷ Sisson and Kimport.

¹⁵⁸ Sisson and Kimport.

¹⁵⁹ Mark (Mark Peter) Jenssen, “Broadcast News and Abortion: The Effects of Conservative Narratives on the Reproductive Health Debate” (Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013), <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/84848>.

¹⁶⁰ Jenssen.

on local television whether abortion should be permitted in rape cases: “if it’s legitimate rape, the female body has a way to shut that whole thing down.”¹⁶¹ Later in 2012, Congressman Joe Walsh inaccurately argued that with new medicines, the exception to abort in order to save the mother’s life was unnecessary.¹⁶² Jenssen argues that these erroneous comments have promoted a growth of misinformation regarding reproductive health issues since 2008. He argues that this trend is part of a larger pattern of changes in participants’ arguments in the abortion debate beginning in 1996 that have favored the conservative perspective.¹⁶³ In turn, these changes have been in response to conservative framing on broadcast news networks. As a result, conservatives suppress liberal counterarguments in hopes of ensuring the supremacy of their point of view to the wider public, increasing said point of view in number and scope.¹⁶⁴

When politicians heavily debate an issue like abortion, subsequent news coverage of the issue often increases. Michael Boyle and Cory Armstrong analyzed articles of abortion protests in four newspapers from 1960-2006. They find that the news coverage often marginalizes or delegitimizes protestors, especially when they are seen as posing a threat to the status quo. These protestors attempt to change current laws and often use extreme tactics.¹⁶⁵ The authors hypothesize that these types of extremist protestors are more likely to receive negative media coverage than groups that have less intense and less extreme goals. Using a measure of a protest group’s threat to status quo called “level of deviance,” they find that pro-life protestors were treated less critically when they supported the status-quo (pre-*Roe v. Wade*) than when they opposed it (post-*Roe v. Wade*). This finding, however, did not hold true for pro-choice protestors,

¹⁶¹ Jenssen.

¹⁶² Jenssen.

¹⁶³ Jenssen.

¹⁶⁴ Jenssen.

¹⁶⁵ Michael P. Boyle and Cory L. Armstrong, “Measuring Level of Deviance: Considering the Distinct Influence of Goals and Tactics on News Treatment of Abortion Protests,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 17, no. 4 (November 12, 2009): 166–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870903156134>.

as the goals of their coverage did not change before and after the decision.¹⁶⁶ When support was high for the court decision, coverage of pro-life protesters became more critical, whereas when support was low, it was less critical. Coverage of pro-choice protestors seemed to be unaffected by this shift and remained steady. They received more favorable coverage when pro-life protestors were more “deviant”.¹⁶⁷ This study shows the importance of considering goals and tactics separately for protest groups and stresses that a group’s tactics have a great influence on how the media treats them.¹⁶⁸ This report indicates that while news media coverage shapes public opinion, public opinion also affects the coverage. The authors suggest different media present content in different ways, and protest coverage changes depending on the medium in which it is presented.¹⁶⁹ Examining abortion protest coverage is directly related to my analysis of abortion’s general presence in broadcast news, both important in the overall climate around the issue.

American news media plays an important role in educating the public on policy issues. Media professionals and journalists often attempt to uphold their end of this by presenting information in a fact-driven, politically neutral manner. However, it is more than occupational ideals that affect which issues and events that constitute the news.¹⁷⁰ Many news organizations are for-profit businesses, which can influence journalistic practices. Rohlinger and Klein explore these ideas in their examination of whether the images networks use to visually represent the abortion issue are homogenized.¹⁷¹ This means they explore what visual landscapes dominated abortion coverage and whether that imagery is stable across events. They look at visuals

¹⁶⁶ Boyle and Armstrong.

¹⁶⁷ Boyle and Armstrong.

¹⁶⁸ Boyle and Armstrong.

¹⁶⁹ Boyle and Armstrong.

¹⁷⁰ Deana A. Rohlinger and Jesse Klein, “Visual Landscapes and the Abortion Issue,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 56, no. 2 (February 1, 2012): 172–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211419487>.

¹⁷¹ Rohlinger and Klein.

networks used in media coverage of abortion from 1980 to 2000. In their findings, they conclude that the prominent visual landscapes in media coverage are similar.¹⁷² The most frequently shown landscapes for abortion are the images of protest, representatives from pro-life/pro-choice movements, government buildings and politicians, abortion clinics, and locations of pro-life violence and its victims.¹⁷³ They also find there are differences in how the media visually portrays both sides of the debate. The imagery of abortion is important to my study as it shows it is not only news media rhetoric that can construct certain frames, it is the visual imagery as well.

Discussing Abortion

Discussing abortion can be difficult. Individuals come from different backgrounds with different life circumstances and political views. These differences can make it challenging to publicly consider abortion. Meredith Johnson Harbach considers the impact of these issues; she explores whether changing our approach to conversations about abortion may minimize polarization and lead us toward common ground.¹⁷⁴

Harbach analyzed how members of the Virginia General Assembly discussed abortion. She found that some comments were dismissive to women's circumstances and others were ill-timed attempts at humor. The substance of the words and rhetoric legislators used were meant to advance their own political agendas, oftentimes being unprofessional, inappropriate or offensive.¹⁷⁵ This is also overwhelmingly the case for politicians and guests who appear on news networks. For example, Delegate C. Todd Gilbert, grouped all women who seek abortions together, when he said that they are "matters of lifestyle convenience."¹⁷⁶ Other comments

¹⁷² Rohlinger and Klein.

¹⁷³ Rohlinger and Klein.

¹⁷⁴ Meredith Johnson Harbach, "How (Not) to Talk about Abortion Essay," *University of Richmond Law Review* 47, no. 1 (2013 2012): 425–40.

¹⁷⁵ Harbach.

¹⁷⁶ Harbach.

dismissed the importance of women’s consent and their bodily integrity.¹⁷⁷ In a discussion around mandatory transvaginal ultrasounds, one Republican legislator reportedly commented that women made their decision to be “vaginally penetrated when they got pregnant” and some claimed that abortion is much more invasive than a mandatory ultrasound.¹⁷⁸ These comments dismiss a woman’s consent and ignore the distinction between a mandatory ultrasound and voluntary intercourse or medical procedures.¹⁷⁹ Still other lawmakers offered ill-timed attempts at humor during the debate. Delegate Bob Marshall alluded to pregnant women and mothers in an offensive, slang-like manner. The tone of the debate became increasingly angry and the Delegates’ choice of words quite hostile. An example of this was when Senator Louise Lucas began quoting John Stewart’s slang for female sex organs. The words offended many, who described the experience as “vile, crude, disrespectful and frequently obscene.”¹⁸⁰ The abortion debates in the General Assembly demonstrate how powerful the language and tone of such policy debates can be.

While abortion can clearly spark heated political debate, Harbach finds that abortion discussions can also be productive and engaging conversations. In her own classroom, Harbach asked students to discuss reproductive rights or *Roe v. Wade*. She asked her students to maintain a respectful and inviting atmosphere in the classroom in an effort to make sure everyone felt comfortable sharing their diverse experiences and opinions. She expressed how her students, rather than dismissing women’s experiences, were eager to explore their rights.¹⁸¹ Harbach compares these student conversations with the debates in the Virginia legislature. She argues

¹⁷⁷ Harbach.

¹⁷⁸ Harbach.

¹⁷⁹ Harbach.

¹⁸⁰ Harbach.

¹⁸¹ Harbach.

students' approach was not to use words that alienated or offended, and to choose their words carefully.¹⁸² While a legislative debate is not the same as an academic dispute, both forums can share common goals of productivity, civility, and increasing understanding.

This chapter outlines studies that have demonstrated the differential treatment of men and women as political figures as well as the partisan depiction of violence against women in the news. It then shifts to examining previous studies on abortion in films and abortion in broadcast news. These studies show that women do not always have a voice on gendered issues in the news and they inform my content analysis, which I will explain in the next chapter.

¹⁸² Harbach.

Chapter 3: Methods, Results and Discussion

In this chapter I will explain the methods I used in my content analysis. My research question is: how does the news media cover the highly partisan women's issue of abortion and what effect might this have on the public? A content analysis permits me to read transcripts of this partisan media directly, allowing me to draw conclusions based on real words and phrases journalists use. This study will help us understand better what partisan media really means aside from a definition and will allow us to see it at play on a single, highly controversial issue. I expect that news hosts and guests from all three networks will be passionate on the topic and take a firm stance. I also expect Fox to differ from CNN and MSNBC and depict abortion as criminal rather than a women's health issue. The next section will describe in detail how I accessed and analyzed these transcripts and provide a list of codes that I used to do so.

Methods

Data for this analysis originated from television news transcripts from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC networks. I chose these three news networks in an effort to represent the ideological diversity of American cable news. Fox News represents more conservative media, MSNBC represents more liberal media, and CNN sits as the more ideologically neutral news network. In order to do this, I completed a search of the Access World News database for all transcripts featuring the term "abortion" in the text.¹⁸³ I chose to limit my search to all transcripts for the most recent 10-year time period (2011–2020). This time frame was chosen based on the contemporary relevance of abortion issues and availability of transcripts across networks.

¹⁸³ The transcripts were filtered for the term "abortion" in the headline for CNN and Fox and "abortion" in the lead/first paragraph for MSNBC. The reason for this difference was because when filtered using headline, MSNBC only yielded one result. I inferred this difference was likely due to how each news network wrote the headlines for these transcripts.

Programs found in the search included all of the shows on each network in the database, but I chose to analyze primetime news over the 2011-2020 period. From CNN, these shows included *Erin Burnett OutFront*, *Anderson Cooper 360*, *Cuomo Prime Time*, *CNN Tonight with Don Lemon* and *Piers Morgan Tonight*. For Fox, these shows included *Kelly File*, *Hannity*, *O'Reilly Factor*, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, *Ingraham Angle*, and *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*. Lastly, for MSNBC, the shows included *All in With Chris Hayes*, *Up with Chris Hayes*, *Rachel Maddow Show*, *Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell* and *Ed Show with Ed Schultz*. There was a total of 15 hosts during the primetime hours on these three networks from 2011-2020.

Table 1: CNN Shows and Transcripts

<i>Erin Burnett OutFront</i>	<i>Anderson Cooper 360</i>	<i>Cuomo Prime Time</i>	<i>CNN Tonight with Don Lemon</i>	<i>Piers Morgan Tonight</i>
5	14	4	7	6

Table 2: Fox News Shows and Transcripts

<i>Kelly File</i>	<i>Hannity</i>	<i>O'Reilly Factor</i>	<i>Tucker Carlson Tonight</i>	<i>On the Record with Greta Van Susteren</i>	<i>Ingraham Angle</i>
7	12	10	32	1	10

Table 3: MSNBC Shows and Transcripts

<i>All in with Chris Hayes</i>	<i>Up with Chris Hayes</i>	<i>Ed Show</i>	<i>Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell</i>	<i>Rachel Maddow Show</i>
61	4	56	98	404

Through my research using Access World News, I created a database of all of the news transcripts that met my search requirements. I collected a total of 471 transcripts from CNN, 245 transcripts from Fox News, and 656 for MSNBC. While these numbers are totals for all shows on the networks, I then limited my sample to only prime time shows. Tables 1-3 show the number of transcripts for each prime time show on each network. Some of the highly represented shows that yielded more transcripts than the others on their network are *Anderson Cooper 360*, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, and *Rachel Maddow Show*. Conversely, *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren* only had one transcript. There was a total of 36 transcripts for CNN, 72 transcripts for Fox and 623 for MSNBC from the prime time shows.

I screened each transcript to ensure it fit with the overall purpose of this study. In effect, this meant transcripts were primarily removed when they only briefly mentioned abortion as a lead-in for a different story to be aired at a later date or time. All of these transcripts as well as duplicate transcripts (i.e., transcripts with identical air date/time and same word count) were discarded. This resulted in 731 transcripts in total (36 from CNN, 72 from Fox; 623 from MSNBC). Since each network had a different number of results, I decided to randomly sample from both Fox and MSNBC so I would code the same number of transcripts from each network.

In total, I coded 35 from each network.¹⁸⁴ To narrow down Fox and MSNBC, I used Excel's random number generator to randomly assign a value to each transcript. I then sorted the transcripts in ascending order and used the transcripts with the 35 smallest randomly assigned numbers.

I then created a series of codes to represent the themes I was most interested in identifying and analyzing in the news transcripts. I identified six major issue categories based on the central themes I was interested in tracing in the news coverage. The issue categories include: (A) health, (B) political, (C) access, (D) religion, (E) race, and (F) conflict as well as (G) other. I coded each of the transcripts after reading through them once first. I also created more specific sub-categories which I discuss in more detail below. I used the same codes for each transcript across all of the news networks. I coded each issue or sub-category that was identified in a transcript. This included all references to abortion, whether about politics, legalization arguments, laws, certain state policies, etc.

The health category (see Table 6) includes the discussion of the health of the mother and the child. It consisted of three subcategories: (a) the mention of health risks to the unborn fetus, (b) the mention of physical health risks to the mother, and (c) mental/emotional risks/warnings. An example of mentioning the health risks to the unborn fetus would be calling it "an innocent child." The mention of physical/emotional health of the mother after an abortion was often an indication of lack of support for abortion, claiming the mother would be hurt by it as well as the fetus.

See Table 7 next for a review of the political category, which demonstrated how abortion is treated frequently as a political issue in the news media. It included subcategories about

¹⁸⁴ I omitted 1 transcript from CNN (for lack of fit) so there were 35 transcripts to read and code from CNN.

support and lack of support for abortion. This was coded whenever a host or guest would directly or indirectly state their opinion. An indirect example of stating an opinion would be the claim that abortion is eugenics to kill one race, suggesting the host or guest was not supportive of abortion rights. Another facet of this category includes when hosts or guests express abortion as a constitutional right or not. This section also coded references to political party as a reason behind support for or opposition to abortion, or a reason why they voted for a certain candidate. This was identified with any mention of a political leader and their stance on abortion, suggesting it is a political issue. This category also consisted of hosts or guests explaining how controversial abortion was. I coded any mention of abortion as “divisive” or an issue that people are passionate about.

The next category is the access category, which looks at the differential access/limited access to abortion. Table 8 lists all of the associated subcategories, including mentioning doctors being in trouble or labeled criminals for performing abortions. It is also about facilities and their credentials and any mention of policies meant to limit access. Next, the discussion of timing and lack of support for “late term abortion” by hosts and guests fit into this category. The term “late term abortion” references disapproval of abortion. This category also contains the discussion of abortion as a result of rape or incest and whether or not hosts or guests supported abortion in these cases. The discussion of lack of access for women of lower socioeconomic status also fits into this category.

The next idea I coded for was religion, outlined in Table 9. I looked for examples of when hosts and guests defended their stance on abortion by using religious arguments, whether conservative or liberal. Race was the next category (see Table 10) and included any comments made about race related to abortion. These comments include certain things like abortion being

used to reduce the population of one racial group or statements that black women have less access to abortion. Table 11 elaborates on the conflict category, looking for tension between speakers. Tensions simply mean disagreements among anybody speaking on the show. Also in the conflict category was the *discussion* of conflict surrounding the abortion issue, pointing out candidates who switched their opinions about the issue.

See Table 12 for the last category, “other”, for which I coded anything relevant that did not fit in any of the above categories or subcategories. An example of this was in Fox News (Transcript 7) where Robert Davi accuses women of using abortion as birth control.¹⁸⁵ This was a notable statement as it was baseless, but accusatory towards women. However, I did not see other examples of this claim. For these reasons, it fits into the “other” category.

I coded the transcripts for the language of both the hosts and the guests. Sources included, but were not limited to, network-employed doctors (identified by any doctor using their expertise while working as a news correspondent), experts (individuals with specialized knowledge on the issue), celebrities or actors, public speakers, politicians, policy advocates, and others trying to influence policy change. Guests also included individuals who shared personal stories about their abortion or that of a close family member or friend.

Table 4. Networks

Numeric Label	Network
1	CNN
2	FOX
3	MSNBC

¹⁸⁵ Laura Ingraham, *Ingraham Angle*, Access World News, March 6, 2020, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1799328EA584E778.

Table 5. Hosts by Label

Numeric Label	Host
1	Anderson Cooper
2	Chris Cuomo
3	Erin Burnett
4	Don Lemon (CNN Tonight)
5	Piers Morgan
6	Tucker Carlson
7	Sean Hannity
8	Ingraham
9	Megyn Kelly
10	Greta Van Susteren
11	Bill O'Reilly
12	Chris Hayes
13	Rachel Maddow
14	Lawrence O'Donnell
15	Ed Schultz

Table 6. Health Category (A)

Subcategory	Explanation
a1	health risks to fetus, mention of killing an “innocent child”
a2	Physical health risks to mother
a3	mental/emotional risks/warnings, seen through commentary on risks associated with abortion or warnings pertaining to abortion

Table 7. Political Category (B)

Subcategory	Explanation
b1	mention of supporting legalization/access to abortion
b2	abortion expressed as a constitutional right
b3	abortion expressed not as a constitutional right
b4	reference to voting based on abortion
b5	mention of supporting punishing women for abortions
b6	reference to political party being a reason behind support or lack of support for abortion
b7	emphasizing controversial nature of abortion politics (divisive)
b8	expression of lack of support for abortion

Table 8. Access Category (C)

Subcategory	Explanation
c1	doctor/medical credentialing – mention of doctor being in trouble
c2	facilities credentials (policies meant to limit access)
c3	discussion of timing of abortions
c4	lack of support for “late term abortion”
c5	rape or incest as an exception for abortion
c6	rape or incest not an exception for abortion
c7	lack of access for lower-income women

Table 9. Religion Category (D)

Subcategory	Explanation
d1	Conservative religious views
d2	Liberal religious views

Table 10. Race Category (E)

Subcategory	Explanation
e1	Comment about race as related to abortion
e2	Comment about eugenics – to diminish the population of one race
e3	Reference to black women having differential access

Table 11. Conflict Category

Subcategory	Explanation
f1	Tensions between speakers
f2	Discussion of conflict within debate – candidates changing their opinions

Table 12. Other Category

Subcategory	Explanation
g1	With references to relevant issues that do not fit into another category

Results and Discussion

In conducting my research, I uncovered a series of important findings. In this section, I will outline these findings by network. I will discuss CNN, Fox, and MSNBC's most important findings by category (health, political, access, religion, race, conflict and other). I will present summary statistics for each of these categories. I will also incorporate illustrative examples from the transcripts of categories from each network. Not every sub-category will be included in the discussion, however, I will discuss each of the broader categories for each network and highlight important aspects of certain sub-categories as well. I will then draw comparisons between my analysis of the three networks and provide comparative figures. I will focus only on the categories that I think offer important insights.

CNN

Health Category

Recall that the health category identifies transcripts where hosts or guests discuss concerns about health for either the women or the fetus. However, only a very small percentage of transcripts discuss abortion as the killing of an innocent child. On Anderson Cooper's show, Rick Santorum (Transcript 1) was one of the few.¹⁸⁶ Santorum argues that he thinks that a rapist should get less jail time than a doctor for performing an abortion. His reasoning is that one must consider the "child" in the situation. He argues that while all rapes are horrible, we must consider that abortion is "killing a human being." There were only a few perspectives like Santorum's expressed in the CNN transcripts in my study. Another example comes from Rebecca Kiessling

¹⁸⁶ Anderson Cooper, *Anderson Cooper 360*, Access World News, May 15, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1737A37219E1AFC8.

(Transcript 35).¹⁸⁷ The broadcast transcript of this episode is entitled: “Rebecca Kiessling, Conceived in Rape.” She shares her own background story and says she owes her life to “Pro-life activists” and if it were not for them, she “would have been killed.”

Next, there are also few (about 2% of transcripts) where the host or guests discuss the potential physical health risks for a woman undergoing an abortion – in this case an illegal one. Physical health risks for this code refer to those that may harm a woman undergoing an *illegal* abortion. I also looked for discussion about physical health risks for women undergoing an abortion, legal or illegal, as a means to warn against the procedure and express lack of support. I did not find any on CNN that used physical health risks to the mother as a means to warn against the procedure. One transcript from the Piers Morgan’s Show (Transcript 35) is the only transcript where a guest on the show expressed concern about the physical health risks to the women.¹⁸⁸ Gloria Allred is a victim of rape and underwent an abortion. She argues that abortion should be legal and safe; when she tried to get an illegal abortion, she almost died due to an infection. Allred uses her own experience as a way to argue for legal access to abortions in the United States.

Political Category

The political category recognizes transcripts that prove abortion is a political, highly partisan issue. Almost 70% of the transcripts included discussion of abortion as a political issue. This included coding the transcript anytime a host or guest references a political party in the

¹⁸⁷ Piers Morgan, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, Access World News, August 21, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F140D303B8F644AD8.

¹⁸⁸ Piers Morgan, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, Access World News, August 21, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F140D303B8F644AD8.

discussion about their views on abortion. An example of this type of language comes from Kirsten Powers (Transcript 1), a CNN Political Analyst, who describes a law that “all of the Republicans voted for” and argues that Republicans are making “abortion, first of all, a political issue in 2020”.¹⁸⁹ This is significant since we already understand the high degree of partisan polarization in the United States and the role the news media plays in this process. It is clear that CNN’s discussions of abortion policy are highly political.

More than half of the transcripts also highlight the controversial nature of abortion. This sub-category includes phrases that emphasize the extremities of the abortion issue. Anderson Cooper (Transcript 1) opens his show saying that Alabama’s Republican Governor Kay Ivey recently signed “the most restrictive abortion bill in the country” into law.¹⁹⁰ Another example of this type comes from Piers Morgan (Transcript 35) describing abortion as an “inflammatory issue.”¹⁹¹ Finally, Chris Cuomo (Transcript 17) says that while *Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land, many people don’t like it in this country.¹⁹² He says abortion is “controversial, especially in red states.” In some cases, I identified a transcript’s discussion as controversial because they

¹⁸⁹ Anderson Cooper, *Anderson Cooper 360*, Access World News, May 15, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1737A37219E1AFC8.

¹⁹⁰ Anderson Cooper, *Anderson Cooper 360*, Access World News, May 15, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1737A37219E1AFC8.

¹⁹¹ Piers Morgan, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, Access World News, August 21, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F140D303B8F644AD8.

¹⁹² Chris Cuomo, *Cuomo Prime Time*, Access World News, April 11, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F172C6E6942463AC8.

made allusions to its controversial nature while in other cases they stated outright that abortion is a controversial issue.

Access Category

In Anderson Cooper's show (Transcript 1) a guest discusses issues of access when states attempt to punish doctors for performing abortions.¹⁹³ Dr. Robinson, a representative for Alabama's Women's Center for Reproductive Alternatives, says that no other types of doctors are restricted or criminalized in this way. She argues that it is not right to penalize physicians for performing a service that certain individuals find morally objectionable. I found that a little over 20% of CNN transcripts mentioned this issue of doctors facing penalties or punishment for performing abortions in certain states.

Religion Category

Recall the religion category refers to any defense of an opinion based on one's religion. I found that there were few religious arguments made by hosts or guests on CNN. One example of a more conservative viewpoint came from Newt Gingrich who appears on Piers Morgan's show (Transcript 36).¹⁹⁴ Gingrich, a former Republican Speaker of the House, argues here that life begins at conception and, thus, a doctor has a moral obligation to try to save both the lives of a mother and a child. When asked about a case where a women's life is at risk without an abortion, Gingrich said he would seek advice from individuals in the "Catholic hierarchy."

¹⁹³ Anderson Cooper, *Anderson Cooper 360*, Access World News, May 15, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1737A37219E1AFC8.

¹⁹⁴ Piers Morgan, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, Access World News, February 27, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F13D331CA77B45870.

Race Category

Race did not play as large of a role in discussions about abortion as I expected. I only identified one of the sub-categories here; I found cases where the hosts or guests discuss the issue of limited access to abortions for black women. An example of this came from Christopher Cuomo's show (Transcript 16).¹⁹⁵ Alyssa Milano, an American actress describes how any woman of privilege that lives in a state that makes abortion illegal can travel to another state to get safe reproductive healthcare. By contrast, she explains that for women of color, marginalized women, or low-income communities, these restrictive bills are going to be catastrophic. These women are the most at risk when it comes to "Heartbeat bills" which essentially criminalize abortion after six weeks or the bill in Texas where they are giving women a "death sentence, the death penalty, if she gets an abortion."

Conflict Category

Tensions between speakers were fairly limited on CNN and I coded this for anything from a disagreement to a quarrel. I identified one example of tension in an episode of Piers Morgan's show (Transcript 35) between Rebecca Kiessling, the woman who was conceived by rape, and the host.¹⁹⁶ Morgan says that he respects her opinion that abortion is the worst thing that can happen to a victim of rape, but that he cannot think of anything "worse for a woman who is raped than being compelled by the law of the country to carry and to bear and to bring up the child of the rapist that [she] despise[s]."

¹⁹⁵ Chris Cuomo, *Cuomo Prime Time*, Access World News, May 14, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17374F9365DD9698.

¹⁹⁶ Piers Morgan, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, Access World News, August 21, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F140D303B8F644AD8.

In a transcript from Anderson Cooper's show (Transcript 13), we see an example of a claim about a politician changing their opinion.¹⁹⁷ Florida Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz argues that Mitt Romney's view of abortion is ambiguous and has changed. She also argues that his view does not align with his party's platform. Schultz says Romney has "previously fully embraced a human life amendment with no exception and said he would be delighted to support it," but then also claims he supports abortion in the cases of rape or incest. Romney is "simply saying one thing, but not insisting that his party's policies, as reflected in their platform, reflect his views."

Other

I used this category to highlight transcripts where I found something compelling about abortion, but it did not neatly fit into any of my existing categories. I coded one episode of Cooper's show (Transcript 14) because of the discussion of sex selective abortions. Kellyanne Conway, a Trump aide, claims that there are "all these little baby girls being killed just because they're girls in this country."¹⁹⁸ Cooper responds quite alarmed and confused and asks where this is taking place. She argues that the Guttmacher Institute is the research arm of Planned Parenthood and has data on sex selective abortions and that Congress and the House just passed a bill to ban sex-selective abortions. This is inaccurate, as the Guttmacher Institute disassociated from Planned Parenthood in 2007.¹⁹⁹ Cooper states there is not much statistical evidence that this

¹⁹⁷ Anderson Cooper, *Anderson Cooper 360*, Access World News, August 23, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F15344E5DA1ABB0A0.

¹⁹⁸ Anderson Cooper, *Anderson Cooper 360*, Access World News, August 21, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F15344E5CBAE28A08.

¹⁹⁹ "Frequently Asked Questions," Guttmacher Institute, April 21, 2016, <https://www.guttmacher.org/guttmacher-institute-faq>.

is actually occurring in the United States. Next, on Cuomo’s show (Transcript 17), James Clapper, former director of national intelligence, compares abortion bills to Jim Crow Laws.²⁰⁰ I coded this under “other” rather than race, as I found Clapper’s analogy to be more about the restrictive, unjust environment the Jim Crow laws created. He sees the restrictive abortion laws in Ohio and other states as “reminiscent of Jim Crow laws” and Cuomo states that they have “the same pernicious intent” of these laws, however, in this case, on women. This transcript highlights how restrictive and threatening to our society these bills in red states can be. Lastly, I coded a transcript from a Piers Morgan’s episode (Transcript 32) about a girl who claims her parents tried to force her to have an abortion at age 16.²⁰¹ Her parents denied the allegations. The baby’s father came on the show and says they were determined to have the baby until his girlfriend’s parents opposed it. According to Attorney Stephen Casey at Texas Center for Defense of Life, this is a “highly underreported type of situation.” This example further demonstrates the complications of the abortion issue and how many intricacies may lie within any abortion discussion.

Fox

Health Category

Fox transcripts more commonly defined abortion as “killing an innocent child” or mentioned an “unborn child” than those on CNN. For example, on Sean Hannity’s show (Transcript 11), Kayleigh McEnany, Trump 2020 Campaign National Press Secretary, and Dan

²⁰⁰ Chris Cuomo, *Cuomo Prime Time*, Access World News, April 11, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F172C6E6942463AC8.

²⁰¹ Piers Morgan, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, Access World News, February 18, 2013, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1448DB984E63BB28.

Bongino, a Fox News Host, discuss abortion. Bongino, who is guest hosting this episode, says it is one thing to frame abortion as a choice, but argues it is not really choice if it's "not a choice for the infant in the womb."²⁰² Another example where a Fox guest refers to a fetus as a child occurs on Tucker Carlson's show (Transcript 26) where Rep. Haahr, the Speaker of the Missouri State House, says they "stand for the innocent, the infirm, we stand for the born and the unborn."²⁰³ A final example comes from Hannity's show (Transcript 38) where he encourages the audience to think about a "little puppy being born" then about "a little child."²⁰⁴ He goes on to claim that a "baby defines innocence."

In another example on Hannity's show, he discusses the mental health of the mother (Transcript 38).²⁰⁵ While I did not include video clips in my content analysis, on this episode Hannity shows a video clip of a conversation between an unidentified man and Kathy Tran, a State delegate in Virginia. The man asks her how late in the third trimester could a physician perform an abortion if he indicated it would impair the mental health of the woman. Tran responds, "or physical health" and he says he means mental health. Tran says her bill would allow a woman to request an abortion even when "she has physical signs she's about to give

²⁰² Sean Hannity, *Hannity*, Access World News, June 28, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1746236F17943970.

²⁰³ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, May 15, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17374F941EB849D0.

²⁰⁴ Sean Hannity, *Hannity*, Access World News, January 30, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17150BE2D0EFDC78.

²⁰⁵ Sean Hannity, *Hannity*, Access World News, January 30, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17150BE2D0EFDC78.

birth” if it would impact her mental health. Hannity claims after the video that not even Tran is comfortable with this bill. Hannity also says this bill would mean if a woman says, “I’m having emotional second thoughts” the doctor would be allowed to commit “infanticide.”

Tucker Carlson, on his eponymous named show (Transcript 46), describes abortion as not only “killing children,” but also “an act of violence against a child who is innocent and forming and against a woman’s body.”²⁰⁶ He defines abortion as physically harming a woman’s body and describes it as a “shame” and a “scandal.” He accuses Democrats of “pretending to care about women and standing out there...saying they represent women,” but claims this is “the furthest thing from the truth.” Carlson makes claims that a woman’s physical and emotional health are at risk if she receives an abortion but does not consider the physical and emotional impact of a woman being forced to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term.

Political Category

I found that over 70% of the Fox transcripts made reference to abortion as a political issue. An example comes from *Tucker Carlson Tonight* (Transcript 21) where Mollie Hemingway, a senior editor at “The Federalist,” says Democrats are “beholden to an abortion lobby that requires them to have increasingly extreme positions.”²⁰⁷ Hosts and guests in these transcripts never defend abortion as a constitutional right, but in about 5% of the transcripts, abortion is explicitly described as not a constitutional right. For example, in one of Carlson’s shows (Transcript 26), the host brings up a Bernie Sanders tweet that said, “Abortion is a

²⁰⁶ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, May 18, 2018, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F16C052D85717A6D0.

²⁰⁷ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, May 22, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17399EA01F9C6070.

constitutional right.”²⁰⁸ Tucker says, “[It is] almost as dumb as anything Joy Behar has ever said. Abortion is not a constitutional right. It is not mentioned in the Constitution. It’s not even hinted at.” In this example, we see the intensity of Carlson’s viewpoint here and it is worth noting that he is not challenging another guest on this question. Rather, he is making this argument without hearing an argument from the opposing side. He goes on to say the legal reasoning behind *Roe vs. Wade* is a “joke,” again using across the board statements which do not consider the other side.

An example of a guest discussing voting and abortion occurs when Ted Cruz is on Megyn Kelly’s show (Transcript 55) while he was a Presidential candidate in 2016. Cruz says that Donald Trump said women should be punished for receiving an abortion only because Trump is “willing to say whatever he can say to try to win votes.”²⁰⁹ Cruz accuses Trump of being a “liberal who is trying to say what he thinks conservatives want to hear.” This demonstrates the importance of the abortion issues for voters and politicians. Only 5% of transcripts explicitly reference making a vote choice based on abortion, but this number does not represent the full picture. This is because a much higher number of transcripts emphasize abortion as political and I think we can infer its relationship to voting from this.

Several transcripts include descriptions of abortion as highly controversial. On Hannity’s show (Transcript 11), Hannity stresses how abortion is a “hot button issue.”²¹⁰ In another episode

²⁰⁸ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, May 15, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17374F941EB849D0.

²⁰⁹ Megyn Kelly, *The Kelly File*, Access World News, April 4, 2016, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F15C0E7F283F759B0.

²¹⁰ Sean Hannity, *Hannity*, Access World News, June 28, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-

(Transcript 38), Hannity describes abortion as a “divisive topic.”²¹¹ About 63% of the transcripts include one or more people expressing their lack of support for abortion in some way. One such example comes from Carlson’s show (Transcript 50) where obstetrician Dr. Robert Lawler, a pro-life doctor, claims clinics are supposed to “counsel the patient on purported benefits of abortion which of course there are none.”²¹²

Access Category

This category refers to any discussion around access, or lack thereof, to abortion, whether related to clinics, doctors, rape or incest, or timing of abortion. Only about 5% of Fox transcripts include individuals who say on air that they do not believe in abortion except in cases of rape or incest. On Kelly’s show (Transcript 55), Ted Cruz argues that while rape is a horrible crime and the perpetrator should be punished, he does not “believe it’s the child’s fault” and it does not “make sense to blame the child.”²¹³ Sixty percent of transcripts mention the timing of abortion after conception. Half of the transcripts in my sample mention “late term abortion” and the host or guests’ opposition to it. “Late term abortion” generally refers to abortions that take place during or after the 21st - 24th week of gestation, which is late in the second trimester.²¹⁴ This

2004&rft_id=info%3Aofid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1746236F17943970.

²¹¹ Sean Hannity, *Hannity*, Access World News, January 30, 2019, [https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aofid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17150BE2D0EFDC78)

2004&rft_id=info%3Aofid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17150BE2D0EFDC78.

²¹² Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, June 23, 2017, [https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aofid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F165392D34648A868)

2004&rft_id=info%3Aofid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F165392D34648A868.

²¹³ Megyn Kelly, *The Kelly File*, Access World News, April 4, 2016, [https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aofid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F15C0E7F283F759B0)

2004&rft_id=info%3Aofid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F15C0E7F283F759B0.

²¹⁴ Ariana Eunjung Cha. “Tough Questions — and Answers — on ‘Late-Term’ Abortions, the Law and the Women Who Get Them,” *Washington Post*, accessed May 23, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2019/02/06/tough-questions-answers-late-term-abortions-law-women-who-get-them/>.

suggests that both Fox’s hosts and guests are very concerned with “late term abortion” and likely help create concern about it. Fox uses this term in order to put it into its viewers’ heads that the later the abortion is, the worse it is for the mother and child. While late term abortions are, in fact, quite rare, this is not how Fox presents them.²¹⁵ I found that the discussion of the timing of abortions and late term abortions, in particular, was quite frequent and significant on Fox. On Hannity’s show (Transcript 11), Kerry Picket, a reporter for *The Daily Caller* website, brings up that “[Hillary Clinton] said she would support abortion all the way up until the third trimester.”²¹⁶ Picket also claims Ralph Northam, Governor of Virginia, supports “post-birth abortions” and describes them as “absurd.” Dan Bongino, who was hosting this episode, says that “safe, legal and rare” abortions have gone out the window if “abortion up to the ninth month of pregnancy” is legalized.

Religion Category

On an episode of Tucker Carlson’s show (Transcript 9), Carlson and his guests discuss abortion in terms of religion. They discuss Pete Buttigieg’s (2020 presidential candidate) opinion that the Bible states that life begins with breath. Carlson invited Ryhan Glezman, Senior Pastor at Community Church of God in Clio Michigan, to refute Buttigieg’s claim. Glezman points to Psalm 139, Verses 13-16: “We are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, intrinsically you were woven together in the woman’s womb.”²¹⁷ Gleman argues that this

²¹⁵ Eunjung Cha.

²¹⁶ Sean Hannity, *Hannity*, Access World News, June 28, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1746236F17943970.

²¹⁷ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, September 10, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17623AA861657428.

demonstrates that life begins at conception. He says it is alarming that there are Christians, like Mayor Pete, who believe that abortion is okay according to the Bible. He says this is “absurd and outlandish” to him.

Race Category

Recall that this category refers to any mention of race related to abortion. Carlson (Transcript 1) describes an article published in *The Atlantic* called “The Last Children of Down Syndrome,” which describes abortion as used for eugenic purposes, specifically to weed out Down syndrome children and other kids with disabilities.²¹⁸ He says this piece “tells [us] a lot about where we are,” indicating he agrees with it. Later in this episode, Evita Duffy, a college student, argues that the article is trying to “normalize eugenics and the genocide of some of the least powerful people in the world.” She claims this is a slippery slope since there are many disabilities and new technologies will allow us to see these before a child is born which will lead to more abortions. Carlson then responds that Planned Parenthood was created to commit genocide against African Americans.

Again, on Carlson’s show (Transcript 2), Candace Owens joins him and argues that the founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger, was a eugenicist.²¹⁹ Owens claims that Sanger’s goal was to target Black Americans. Owens argues that the “Black American population would be double today if it were not for abortion.” Owen says 63% of Planned Parenthood clinics are in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods and claims this is “systematic

²¹⁸ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, December 4, 2020, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17F2DBC5C76A0688.

²¹⁹ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, October 26, 2020, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17E5FEA6B850BB98.

targeting.” However, the Guttmacher Institute reports that of all abortion providers, less than one in 10 are located in zip codes that have majority Black populations.²²⁰ She encourages the audience if they are looking for “systemic racism,” they “may want to take a look at Democratic policies.”

Conflict Category

On Carlson’s show (Transcript 21), Molly Hemingway claims that 10 years ago, Democrats would argue abortion should be “safe, legal, and rare.”²²¹ Now, according to Hemingway, the “approved position” of Democrats is that “abortions can take place, anytime, anywhere, and the taxpayers should fund it.” She claims this is a “radical shift” from what we have seen, and it is far outside of mainstream American beliefs. This is an example of code f2, which is when a host or guest mentions a political group or politician changing opinions or their views about abortion. Another example of this comes from Kelly’s show (Transcript 55) where Kelly discusses when Trump said that he believed women should be punished if abortions were made illegal and a woman had one.²²² Then, according to Kelly, he “dialed that back and reversed himself on it.”

Other

To reiterate what qualifies as “other,” it is those transcripts that include an anecdote or claim that I did not see in any other transcripts, however, were compelling in some way. I coded

²²⁰ Shyrisa Dobbins-Harris, “The Myth of Abortion as Black Genocide: Reclaiming Our Reproductive Choice,” *NATIONAL BLACK LAW JOURNAL* 26 (n.d.): 45.

²²¹ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, May 22, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F17399EA01F9C6070.

²²² Megyn Kelly, *The Kelly File*, Access World News, April 4, 2016, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F15C0E7F283F759B0.

an episode of Ingraham's show (Transcript 7) as "other" when actor Robert Davi commented on a brief video of Busy Phillips, an actress. While I did not code the video, in the clip, Phillips expresses that she has all of what she has – a hybrid car, a beautiful office and home – because she was allowed bodily autonomy at age 15. Davi says "they are condoning abortion as birth control, as opposed to for special – 50 million children being aborted when we have the science today that says – and I am all for a woman's right to choose."²²³ Davi does not specify who "they" are, however, I believe he is referring to Democrats. He pretty clearly says he is not for a woman's right to choose, and then backtracks that he is in fact for a woman's right to choose. He then says he is "luckily not a female" as he would "hate to be in the position." He argues, "we should be screaming about birth control, other methods of women taking care of their bodies, and understanding the sexual reproduction and protecting that aside from the raping and other things." I coded this as "other" because of this accusation of women using abortion as "birth control." I did not see other examples of this type of claim and he presents no legitimate evidence that women do this.

Below I will describe some other examples of transcripts that were coded as "other." In most cases, I chose this code because the topic or frame was quite idiosyncratic, but this should give a sense of some of the discussions. I coded an episode from *Ingraham Angle* (Transcript 18) as "other" because the discussion was focused on how Disney would not film in Georgia after

²²³ Laura Ingraham, *Ingraham Angle*, Access World News, March 6, 2020, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1799328EA584E778.

the abortion ban.²²⁴ I coded another episode from *Hannity* (Transcript 36) as “other” because it included a guest referring to a doctor who performed an abortion as a “murderer.”²²⁵

I coded another *Tucker Carlson Tonight* transcript (Transcript 51) in the “other” category because it discussed a specific abortion-related case. The case consisted of the Center for Medical Progress being sued by abortionists after secretly taping their activities. They discuss whether the Judge overseeing the case, William Orrick, is fair for the job. He allegedly has ties to Planned Parenthood and has previously concealed videos showing what abortion clinic workers are willing to say behind closed doors. Carlson claims the judge “clearly has a pre-existing personal bias and prejudice in favor of [Planned Parenthood].”²²⁶ A guest on the episode also said the judge should not be hearing cases about Planned Parenthood. Lastly, an episode of O’Reilly’s show (Transcript 69) showed a skit by actress Ashley Judd.²²⁷ She is sarcastically asking Rick Santorum, a Republican presidential candidate at the time, why he would like to “terminate” his candidacy. She says “I am sure that is a very hard decision for you. You’re a grown man running for president and I’m just a woman who’s never worked in politics and couldn’t possibly understand what you’re going through,” clearly alluding to his position on

²²⁴ Laura Ingraham, *Ingraham Angle*, Access World News, May 31, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F173CEA3FDF9BA4F0.

²²⁵ Sean Hannity, *Hannity*, Access World News, February 1, 2019, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1715B304023892B0.

²²⁶ Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Access World News, June 9, 2017, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F164F49DFE3C009E0.

²²⁷ Bill O’Reilly, *The O’Reilly Factor*, Access World News, April 23, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F15446A428410E8A8.

abortion. O'Reilly questions whether it was a "great career move" for Judd, and asks Paul Bond, a Hollywood Reporter. Bond says it was a "risky move to get so political." I found this an interesting example of the type of coverage on Fox and the focus on an actress.

MSNBC

Health Category

Now we turn our attention to MSNBC. In the health category, I identified only one transcript for mentioning the "killing" of children or support for the unborn. This was on Chris Hayes' show (Transcript 12) when Rev. Patrick Mahoney, a Christian activist, claims we should not be "complacent while women are being brutalized and viable children are dying."²²⁸ None of the transcripts make direct reference to what will happen emotionally or physically to a woman who chooses to have an abortion. These results suggest MSNBC's hosts and guests are not as concerned as other networks with this type of rhetoric about unborn children and presenting claims about a woman's health if she chooses to have an abortion.

Political Category

When we look at the political category, we find that almost 70% of transcripts have one or more people who express their support for legal abortion. An example of this is on Rachel Maddow's show (Transcript 427) where Virginia State Delegate David Englin is on as a guest. He argues that Republican legislators in Virginia "decided to play doctor" and come up with a new bill that bullies women into not having abortions.²²⁹ He notes it includes provisions like:

²²⁸ Chris Hayes, *All in With Chris Hayes*, Access World News, December 1, 2015, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1597B896AA746C68.

²²⁹ Rachel Maddow, *The Rachel Maddow Show*, Access World News, February 22, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F155FC2A1C8A7D5E8.

“requiring women who could be victims of rape or suffering from miscarriages, to have images, ultrasound images placed in their medical file.” He describes this as “emotional blackmail to prevent abortion” and believes it is wrong. In the same episode, Englin also states these restrictive bills bully women into “not exercising their constitutional right,” suggesting abortion is a constitutional right.

About 95% of the transcripts had one or more people allude to their belief that abortion is political. On the *Rachel Maddow* show (Transcript 90), Nancy Northup from the Center of Reproductive Rights says that in the 40 years since *Roe*, there have been many attempts “by politicians to shut down access to abortion services.”²³⁰ This reflects the idea that abortion rights remain in the hands of politicians.

There are also several transcripts that reference voting based on abortion. For instance, on *All in with Chris Hayes* (Transcript 45), Terry O’Neill argues that Republicans are on track to massively lose the women’s vote if they try to shut down Planned Parenthood care.²³¹ Almost 30% of transcripts directly mention the controversial nature of abortion. In this same episode, Brian Beutler from *The New Republic* explains that abortion issues “generate some controversy” and Alex Wagner, MSNBC guest host for Chris Hayes, then responds that Planned Parenthood “has been raging for some time now.” This demonstrates how relevant and controversial the abortion issue is.

²³⁰ Rachel Maddow, *The Rachel Maddow Show*, Access World News, October 6, 2014, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F155FC2A3121CCB88.

²³¹ Chris Hayes, *All in with Chris Hayes*, Access World News, August 4, 2015, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1571252A796DB0D0.

Access Category

On the same episode quoted above of Hayes' show (Transcript 45), the host provides an example of access concerns when he mentions that doctors face "violent attacks on abortion providers."²³² *All in with Chris Hayes* (Transcript 12) provides a good example of code c2: credentialing of medical facilities and policies meant to limit women's access to abortions.²³³ An "unidentified female" on Hayes' show argues Republicans want to ban abortion, but cannot without overturning *Roe v. Wade*, so they are attempting to pull it apart piece by piece. "[They] prohibit your health plan from covering abortion. They limit how medication can be provided. They ban certain methods of abortion. It makes it incredibly difficult for providers to do their job, and for women to access services." Hayes says over the last four years, states have enacted over 230 abortion restrictions which were designed "to make it more difficult for women to get access to care, or in some cases, close clinics all together." This discussion about lack of access in terms of facilities is important to note since many abortion clinics have been targeted in order to decrease accessibility.

Religion Category

Religion was rarely discussed on any of the MSNBC shows. The only example comes from Schultz's show (Transcript 434). The comedian Lizz Winstead says that if she, as a person

²³² Chris Hayes, *All in with Chris Hayes*, Access World News, August 4, 2015, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1571252A796DB0D0.

²³³ Chris Hayes, *All in with Chris Hayes*, Access World News, December 1, 2015, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F1597B896AA746C68.

of faith, wants to be the best person, parent, wife, spouse she can be, that also involves her having the “good choice of conscience” when to have children.²³⁴

Race Category

I did not find any examples of transcripts that discussed race and abortion. This suggests that MSNBC does not focus on race or describe abortion as a form of “eugenics.”

Conflict Category

Conflict among guests or hosts was very infrequent on MSNBC. In fact, I did not identify any instances of conflict between speakers in any of the transcripts. A few times, a host or guest on MSNBC discussed political leaders who have changed their opinions on abortion. On O’Donnell’s show (Transcript 426), Alice Stewart, national press secretary for Santorum for President, explains how Mitt Romney has “flip-flopped” on the abortion issue and has said many falsehoods when it comes to abortion.²³⁵

Other

There were only a small number of MSNBC transcripts that I coded as “other.” On Maddow’s show (Transcript 239), I coded an episode for “other” because it discussed in detail Latino public opinion on abortion.²³⁶ This did not fit into the race category, as this category does not include the expression of opinions a certain race hold. The race category is more about a host

²³⁴ Ed Schultz, *The Ed Show*, Access World News, February 17, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F155FC2E609D3CEE0.

²³⁵ Lawrence O’Donnell, *Last Word with Lawrence O’Donnell*, Access World News, February 22, 2012, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F155FC2300F0B8830.

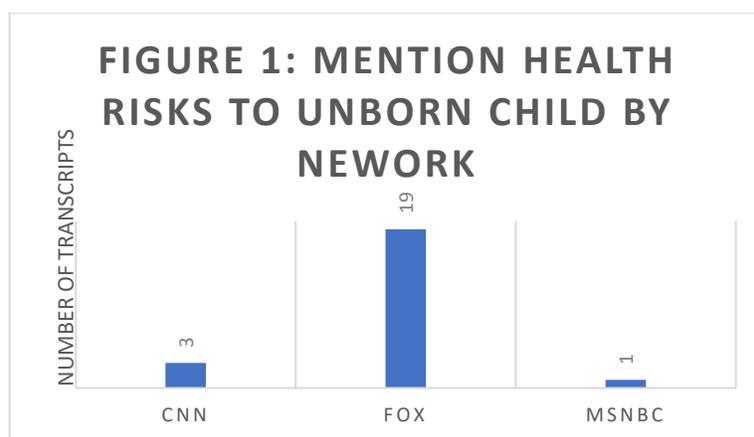
²³⁶ Rachel Maddow, *The Rachel Maddow Show*, Access World News, March 19, 2013, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aasid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB57A22C52F8A&rft_val_for mat=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F155FC29F536C4270.

or guest’s opinion on abortion as related to race, not a certain race’s feelings toward the issue. I thought it was interesting how Maddow emphasizes about two-thirds of Latinos think abortion should be legal and argues that Republican stereotypes about Latino public opinion on abortion are largely unfounded.

CNN, Fox and MSNBC

Now that I have described the results of my content analysis for each network individually, I will compare my results by network. First, I will go through the major differences between networks in how they discuss abortions and what issues they most often present. Then I will discuss some of the similarities between the news networks in their abortion coverage.

In the health category, Fox was much more likely to refer to abortion as the “killing of an innocent child” or mention the unborn child’s rights. About 54% of Fox’s transcripts mention these types of concerns while only 2% of MSNBC’s did and 8% of CNN’s. As seen in Figure 1, Fox is about 6 times more likely than CNN to defend the unborn child’s rights and almost 20 times more likely than MSNBC. This appears to be a fairly noteworthy difference and shows Fox’s hosts, guest hosts, and guests regularly define abortion as the killing of a child.



In terms of the women, only one CNN transcript (approximately 2% of transcripts) mentions the emotional health of the mother if she chooses to abort and only one mentions her

physical health. This is quite different than Fox where almost 15% of transcripts discuss a woman's physical health and 8% discuss her mental/emotional health. On the other hand, MSNBC transcripts include no mentions of a woman's physical or emotional health due to an abortion. While this was not a majority of Fox transcripts, they are still markedly higher than the two other networks. This, of course, does not mean Fox is more concerned with a woman's physical and mental stability, but, rather, uses it as a rhetorical device to frame their opposition to abortion. This is alarming considering none of these transcripts discuss the physical or mental health of a woman who is forced to bear a child she is not prepared for or for any other of the many reasons a woman may not feel able carry a fetus to term or deliver a baby.

Next, we turn to a comparison of the political category. About 37% of CNN's transcripts include one or more individuals who express their support for abortion in some way. Only one transcript out of 35 (2% of all transcripts) includes somebody who expresses opposition to abortion. For Fox, only about 8% include someone who supports legal abortion and 60% include someone who opposes it. For MSNBC, about two-thirds of the transcripts include someone expressing support for legal abortion whereas none of the transcripts feature someone who expresses opposition. These results are presented below in Figures 2 and 3. They are compelling because both CNN and MSNBC have significantly lower opposition to legal abortion. A much higher percentage of Fox's transcripts (60%) include at least one person expressing disapproval. Regardless of the fact that the right of a woman to terminate her pregnancy has been established in the United States for nearly five decades, political attempts to restrict legal abortion services have led to both the curtailment of public funding and more state-level regulation of the conditions under which an abortion can be performed.²³⁷

²³⁷ Willard Cates, "Commentary: Abortion Policy and Science: Can Controversy and Evidence Co-Exist?," *Journal of Public Health Policy* 33, no. 3 (2012): 363–67.

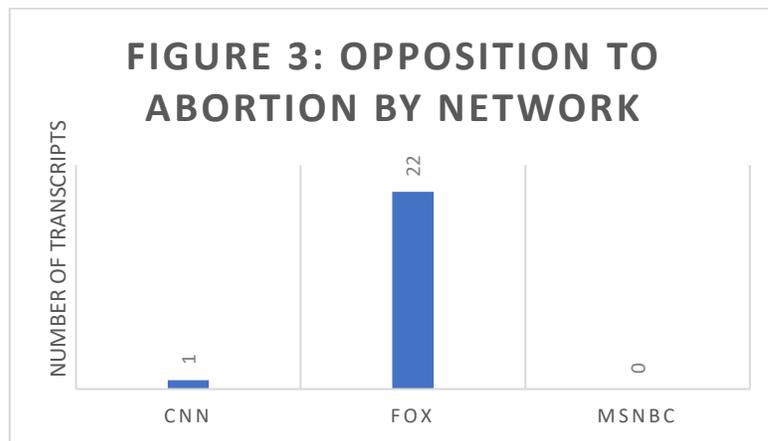
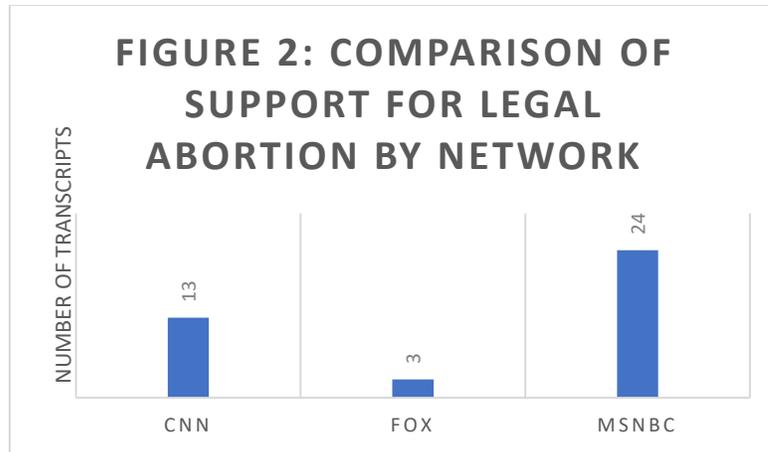
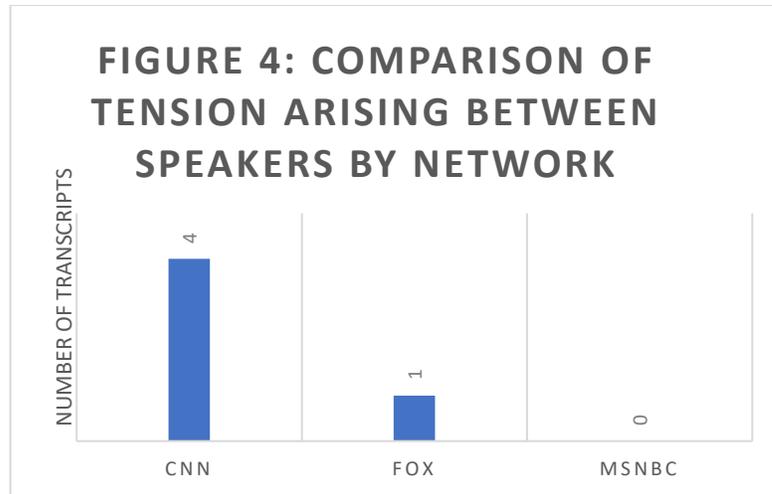
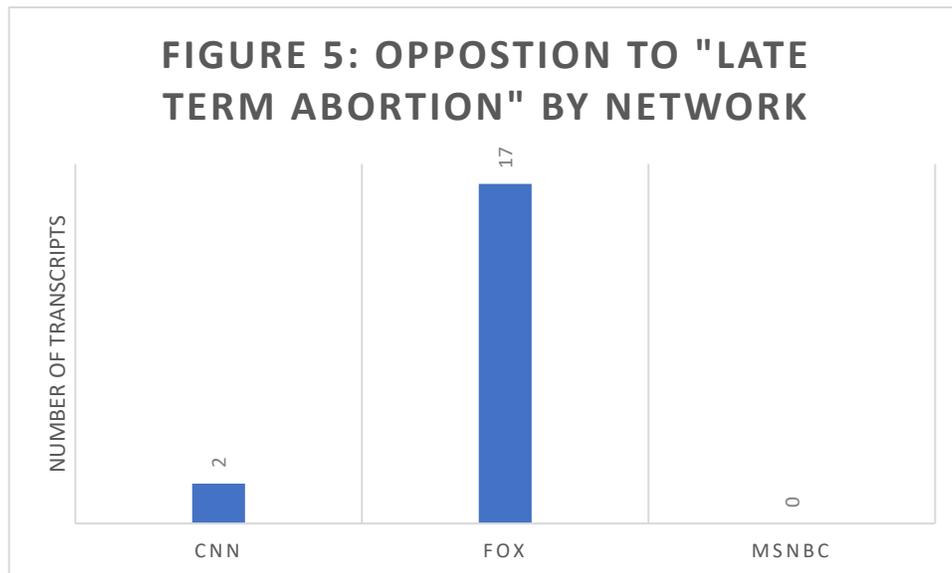


Figure 4 presents a comparison by network of the number of episodes where I found individuals with opposing views on abortion discussing them on a show (coded as tension in my content analysis). Overall, there were not actually many examples of this type of tension between speakers on any of the three news networks. CNN had the highest percentage (11% of transcripts) to include some sort of disagreement. Fox had only about 2% and MSNBC had none. This demonstrates that CNN is the most open to hosting opposing viewpoints about abortion on shows, however, this was still only a small percentage of their overall transcripts.

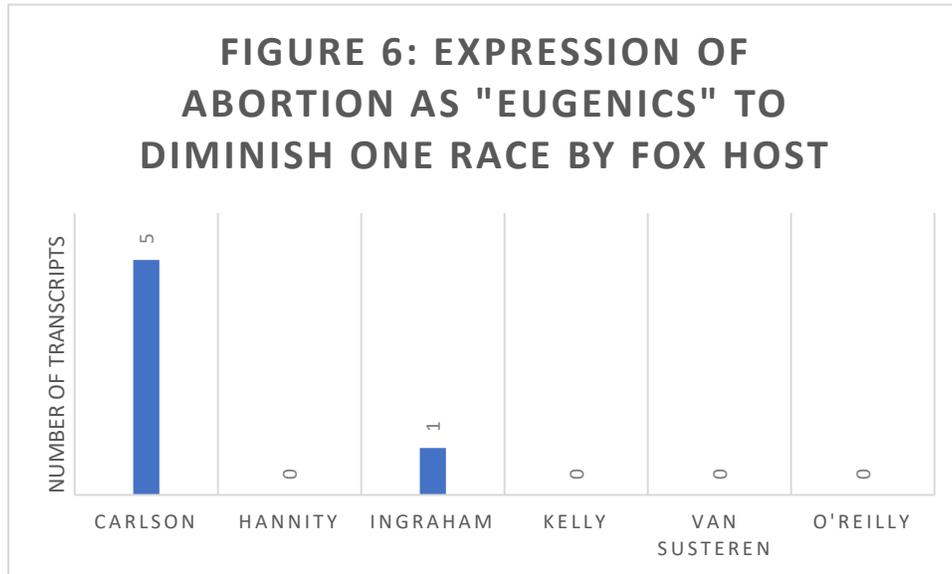


In the next category, access, Fox discussed the timing of an abortion significantly more than CNN and MSNBC. Fox referred to “late term abortion” more often than the other networks; hosts and guests on Fox often claimed Democrats wanted easy access to abortions to be possible all the way up until the delivery date. About half of Fox’s transcripts included a host or guest who mentioned their opposition to “late term abortion,” compared to only 5% of CNN’s and none of MSNBC’s (see Figure 5 below).



When it comes to the race category, Tucker Carlson on Fox most often framed abortion as a case of “eugenics”. CNN and MSNBC rarely, if ever, referred to abortion issues in any way

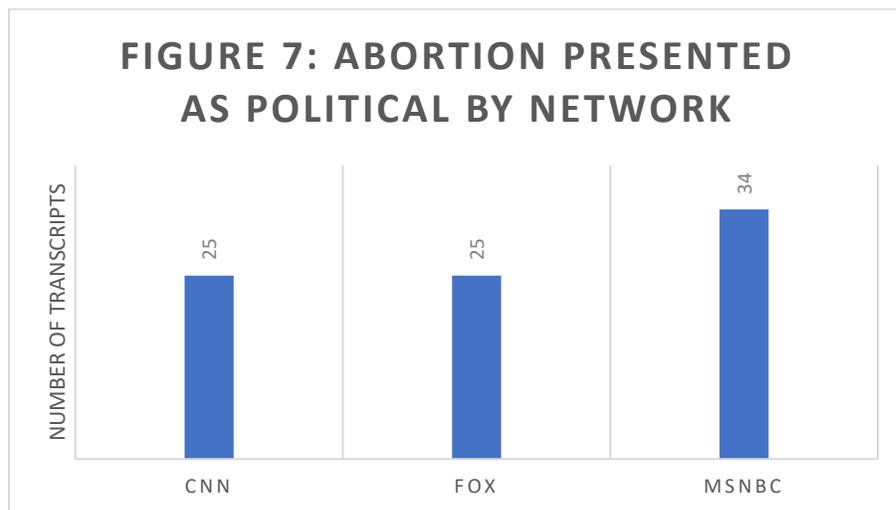
related to race. Figure 6 shows a comparison of Fox News' shows (by host) discussing "eugenics" and abortion. Clearly, Carlson, or guests on his show, were the most likely to claim abortion access is a policy meant to target the Black population.



However, it should be noted that CNN, Fox and MSNBC are not polar opposites in *all* facets of their abortion coverage. Figure 7 presents the transcripts (by network) where abortion is framed or discussed as a political issue. I find that a majority of the transcripts from all three of the networks define or frame abortion as a political topic. This includes 70% of CNN's transcripts, 70% of Fox's, and about 97% of MSNBC's. This demonstrates how politicized abortion has become and that the vast majority of news coverage presents it as a political issue to be decided on by politicians and the government. The use of politically constructed language has shifted the trajectory of the abortion debate which is already an emotional and divisive issue.²³⁸ Another similarity between all three networks' coverage is that they all tend to present abortion as a controversial issue. As presented in Figure 8, 57% of CNN's transcripts, 37% of Fox's, and

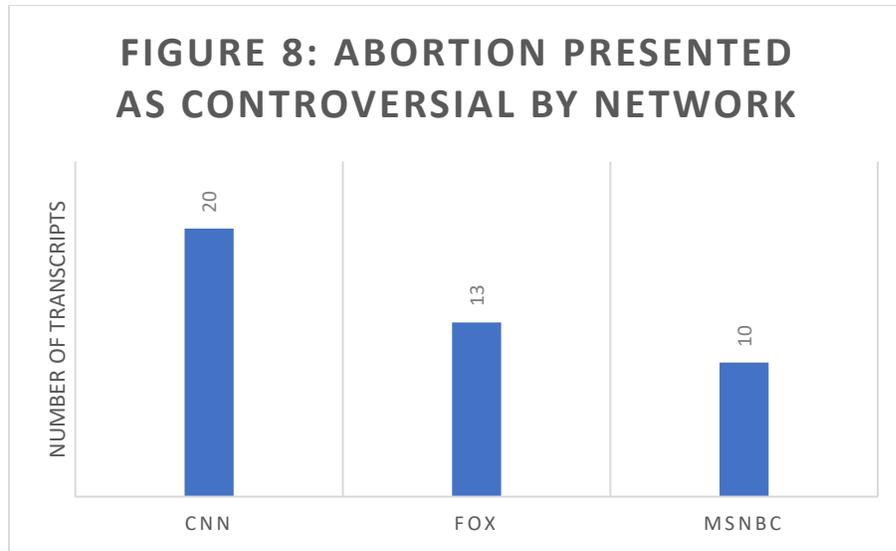
²³⁸ Armitage, "Political Language, Uses and Abuses."

almost 30% of MSNBC’s emphasize the controversy surrounding abortion. Other researchers have backed this up by showing that the topic of abortion is among the most incendiary and polarizing issues of our time.²³⁹ Through prior data from telephone surveys, researchers from the Pew Research Center have concluded there is a substantial, and growing, partisan divide on abortion.²⁴⁰ The perspective that abortion is controversial does not appear to vary by news network or partisan perspective.



²³⁹ Cates, “Commentary.”

²⁴⁰ 1615 L. St NW, Suite 800 Washington, and DC 20036 USA 202-419-4300 | Main 202-857-8562 | Fax 202-419-4372 | Media Inquiries, “5 Facts about the Abortion Debate in America,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed May 23, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/30/facts-about-abortion-debate-in-america/>.



Language is an important tool in convincing people of one point of view or turning them against another.²⁴¹ It is an extremely important part of the abortion debate and we see many examples of the role of language, rhetoric, and framing on news media coverage of abortion. Matt Bai explained in *The New York Times Magazine* that the challenge is to frame the debate in a way that resonates in the culture by “choosing the language to define a debate and, more important, with fitting individual issues into the context of broader story lines.”²⁴² Discourse theory also helps us to understand the overall effect that the news has on public opinion. It demonstrates “how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created in the first place and how they are maintained and held in place over time”.²⁴³ Discourse theorists argue that words do not have intrinsic meaning, but that their surrounding contexts inform their meaning. This type of interpretation and analysis is significant to this project. I argue that the context of the partisan news networks impacts the way the audience understands the language

²⁴¹ Armitage, “Political Language, Uses and Abuses.”

²⁴² Armitage.

²⁴³ Armitage.

they use. According to discourse analysts, discourse both reflects and creates human beings “world views”.²⁴⁴ Networks like CNN, Fox and MSNBC frame the debate and interpretation of abortion issues which also shapes individuals’ world views.

This chapter not only reviews CNN, Fox, and MSNBC’s findings as they stand on their own, but also views them in comparison to one another. The latter half of this section, combining all three networks, gives the bigger picture about why all of this matters. It is easier to see a political agenda on one network, when it is compared to others. It is also more convincing when certain ideas are consistent throughout all three networks, such as abortion being highly controversial. This chapter leads into the conclusion, where I will summarize my findings, address any shortcomings, and provide recommendations for journalists and Democratic activists.

²⁴⁴ Armitage.

Chapter 4: Summary, Shortcomings, Recommendations and Conclusion

Summary

This thesis aims to arrive at a fuller understanding of what partisan media looks like, and on which networks it is the most polarizing. By starting chapter 1 with an overview of polarization in America, my goal is to show the increasingly hostile environment we live in. I included summaries of several other studies; whose goal was to evaluate the impact that partisan media may have on polarization. Many of these studies show a significant impact, and a positive relationship between polarization and the popularity of partisan media.

To get more specific into the relevant topic of this thesis (abortion), it was important not only to explore the effects of partisan media on polarization, but the effects of partisan media surrounding women's issues. This is why in chapter 2, I reviewed news coverage of women in politics and as candidates, violence against women, and of course abortion. This section outlines the weight of the abortion issue, which I elaborate on further with my own research in Chapter 3.

To reiterate the methods of this thesis, I collected transcripts from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC from the database Access World News to conduct a content analysis. I read through each transcript, screening for the categories and subcategories broken down in chapter 3 (Categories: health, political, access, religion, race, conflict and other). I was able to make several important conclusions based on my analysis. I found that Fox was the network who expressed the most opposition to the legalization of abortion, and often mentioned the rights of the unborn child and the timing of the abortion after conception. Fox was also not convinced that abortion was a constitutional right, and certain hosts referred to it as a form of eugenics to diminish one race. I found the majority of hosts and guests on CNN and MSNBC favored a woman's right to choose, and rarely mentioned the timing of the abortion as a reason for why it

should not be legal. While CNN was the most likely to invite a conflicting viewpoint guest onto their show, numbers were generally low among all three networks when it came to disagreement among speakers. One thing all three networks' hosts and guests did agree on, is that abortion is a highly political, controversial topic that, whether they support this or not, government officials are deciding on. I will now outline some shortcomings that arose in my work, and subsequently offer recommendations for news networks or Democratic activists who want to address the adverse effects of partisan media.

Shortcomings

As my analysis progressed, certain shortcomings surfaced. In a future study on this topic, it would be beneficial to include a larger sample because certain categories were not as prevalent in my own. For example, religion is a powerful factor in forming public opinion on abortion, however, I was not able to draw any major findings about religion. CNN, Fox, and MSNBC only discussed religion as a topic pertaining to abortion, as in they expressed how *others* may view it based on their religious beliefs. As I have stated previously, I did not include instances of hosts or guests expressing someone else's opinions, only their own, in my study. A future study taking a more general approach of exactly what certain networks' shows display could include a segment on how and how often they discuss other people's (presidential/senatorial candidates, celebrities, etc.) opinions on abortion and whether they allude to religion often or not. In my study, however, hosts and guests rarely expressed their opinions based on their own religion.

Another shortcoming was the omission of video clips. For my study, video clips were not included because I considered them the expression of someone else's opinion who was not on the show. Video clips often included political candidates, typically presidential candidates giving a speech or making a comment. I omitted them from my content analysis because my interest

was specifically on the ideas that the hosts and guests defended. It would have been difficult to code the opinions of a presidential candidate who was simply on video in my project as devised. However, in the future I would suggest including such video clips in analysis.

Another idea for future research is to include how many times a network invites certain guests back to their show. It would be interesting to see how many times a network invites the same guest back. I would also suggest including details about guests in my analysis, including their political party, in order to compare the different networks and the types of guests they invite, including in a reoccurring role. Analysis of the way the hosts react to different people is another idea worth exploring. In my study, hosts tend to get along with their guests and agree with them on the majority of issues across all three networks. Is this a coincidence? Based on my findings, I would argue no and that most guests are strategically invited on, knowing they will agree with the host on the abortion issue.

Recommendations

Based on my analysis and conclusions, I will now offer some relevant recommendations. Given the nature of this project, my recommendations are for journalists and news networks specifically, rather than for policy alone. Before specific recommendations can be made, we must understand the impact that partisan media has on the public. I will first discuss the findings from a different study on partisan media which will enable me to then offer my own recommendations based on this research project.

Matthew Levendusky conducted an experimental design exposing subjects to treatment or control, however assessed the probability of treatment outside the research setting. Levendusky asked subjects which of three types of news (e.g., a show from Fox News like *The O'Reilly Factor*) they would “most like to watch” before exposing them to a randomly selected

clip from one of three programs. The three programs were a series of video clips from like-minded, cross-cutting, or neutral partisan media programs (treatment assignment was held constant for each subject).²⁴⁵ The clips came from PBS News Hour (neutral clips), Fox News (right-wing source) or MSNBC (left-wing source).²⁴⁶ Levendusky found stronger polarizing effects of like-minded exposure among participants who preferred the neutral or like-minded clips than among subjects who preferred the counter-attitudinal clips.²⁴⁷ In other words, subjects who watch like-minded media become even more convinced that their side's arguments are strong and compelling.²⁴⁸ This is significant to my research and specifically to Figure 4, as it shows how like-minded exposure leads to overconfidence in one's beliefs, resulting in lack of compromise. Recall that Figure 4 displays the scarcity of disagreements among speakers on the news, suggesting their like-mindedness. This study indicates; however, it is not only the hosts and guests who fail to challenge one another, but the audience as well. These findings reflect the possible impact of the partisan media I evaluate in my content analysis. They also inspire my recommendation encouraging inter-political party conversations, on which I will elaborate next.

Disagreement over the issues of the day is not necessarily what makes a country polarized. Research has shown that people actively use partisan cues when evaluating different policies; my own findings confirm this existing research (see Figure 7).²⁴⁹ A study by Hawkins and Nosek shows that labeling policies as "Democrat" or "Republican" can influence policy support, all dependent on the implicit bias of participants toward each party.²⁵⁰ In my research,

²⁴⁵ Matthew S. Levendusky, *I Do Partisan Media Polarize Voters?*, 2011.

²⁴⁶ Levendusky.

²⁴⁷ Prior, "Media and Political Polarization."

²⁴⁸ Levendusky.

²⁴⁹ Lee De-Wit, Sander Van Der Linden, Cameron Brick. "What Are the Solutions to Political Polarization?," Greater Good, accessed May 3, 2021, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_are_the_solutions_to_political_polarization.

²⁵⁰ De-Wit et al.

the discussion of a candidate's support or lack of support for abortion was directly linked to their political party. Similarly, treating abortion as a political topic on cable shows likely suggests to the public that their opinion on it should align with their political party identification. This reinforces the idea that framing issues as supporting the goals of either the Democratic or Republican Party heavily influence people.²⁵¹

Since the 1950s, the United States has been comprised of individuals who tend to not support policies proposed by members outside of their political party.²⁵² Figure 4 demonstrates this point; I found that all three networks rarely presented competing arguments between a host and a guest on the same show about abortion. Partisan networks shy away from inviting conflicting opinions onto their shows, further pitting groups against each other and reinforcing existing partisan preferences with their viewers.

While this research is reflective of the polarization surrounding the abortion issue, some of the relevant solutions are for news networks who perpetuate it. The following list provides solutions to some of the main issues persistent in my research.

1. **Inter-Political Party Conversation.** As seen in Figure 4, news networks rarely invite opposing parties onto their shows to discuss abortion. This is a disservice to all parties and promotes like-minded individuals from listening to other opinions. The “contact hypothesis” suggests that getting to know each other can reduce prejudice between groups, allowing for more collaboration.²⁵³ Many conditions must be met in order for these integrated conversations to reduce prejudice, including sustained contact (consistently inviting differing opinions onto the show), a genuine exchange of ideas, and

²⁵¹ De-Wit et al.

²⁵² De-Wit et al.

²⁵³ De-Wit et al.

they should be between individuals of similar social rank.²⁵⁴ A promising model of something similar that has enabled meaningful contact among groups in conflict involves “Citizens Assemblies” where representative citizens are brought together to deliberate over challenging social or political issues.²⁵⁵ The assemblies are a kind of jury duty for political planning and offer a platform for different groups to discuss issues and establish a common ground to act upon.²⁵⁶ While tensions may arise when including differing viewpoints on news shows, they will only contribute to a wholistic understanding of the issues.

2. **Separation of Policy and Party.** Another potential solution to partisan media’s polarizing effect is for journalists and show hosts to attempt to separate policies from party identification. Figure 7 shows how each of the three networks discusses abortion as a political issue. Partisan media, regardless of which party the network supports, emphasizes that abortion has been and is becoming a more political issue on which politicians must take a stance. This solution would allow hosts to facilitate a conversation that is focused on the actual issue rather than the political motivating forces. To put this recommendation into action, hosts would need to be ready to change their rhetoric around certain issues. For example, abortion should be expressed more as a “women’s health issue” rather than “first of all a political issue in 2020” (Transcript 1, CNN). Implementing more conversations separating abortion policy from political affiliation is one step closer to changing the existing political rhetoric related to abortion policy.

²⁵⁴ De-Wit et al.

²⁵⁵ De-Wit et al.

²⁵⁶ De-Wit et al.

3. **Scientific Back-Up of Statements.** I found it common on Fox News for hosts or guests to make sweeping statements about abortion, for instance, saying it is used for “eugenics” in order to “diminish one race.” Fox seems suspiciously concerned about minority populations when it comes to abortion in ways that they are not when discussing other issues such as BLM.²⁵⁷ News networks, especially those that people watch heavily and rely upon, should be required or encouraged to provide scientific evidence of across-the-board statements. An example of a statement that should be backed up with proof came from Candace Owens when she said the black population would be doubled today if it were not for abortion (Transcript 1, Fox). The audience has no indication where she got this information, but it seems plausible enough to believe and repeat. This could lead to further spreading of false statements and wider lack of knowledge. Given Freedom of the Press and the First Amendment in the United States, it is a bit tricky to mandate or require such changes. However, it would be incredibly beneficial to the public and I believe this is an avenue that should be pursued by Democratic activists.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that partisan media is, in fact, prevalent in our society, and networks certainly have different goals. Future research is needed, potentially in the form of surveys, to understand the true impact this type of media has on public opinion. Still this content analysis provides a clearer understanding of the different ways the media polarizes its audience and shifts their language in order to push their own political agenda with regards to abortion. The guests they invite on have a significant impact on the conversation on the show and some networks only choose to invite certain perspectives into their space. My analysis reinforces the

²⁵⁷ Eric K. Arnold, “The BLM Effect: Hashtags, History and Race,” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 21, no. 2 (2017): 8–15.

idea that abortion is framed as a political issue on cable media. Further, I find Fox to demonstrate the most opposition to abortion rights, a direct reflection of the Republican party platform that has been at play for decades. This disapproval is evident with hosts and guests referring to abortion as “killing an innocent child”, or as eugenics to diminish one race. My content analysis shows the evident partisan slant that is omnipresent among certain Americans’ trusted news sources.

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