



Understanding the Media Strategies of America's Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Movements

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Coverage in the U.S. news media is endlessly debated by pundits and advocates. Are some movements and advocacy groups unfairly ignored? Is coverage objective or skewed? Do groups gain or lose from coverage of controversial events? My new book tackles this topic by examining the interactions of U.S. movements contending over abortion issues from the 1980s to the present. I look in depth at two pro-choice organizations – the National Organization for Women and the Planned Parenthood Federation of America – as well as at two pro-life organizations – the National Right to Life Committee and Concerned Women for America.

Weaving together analyses of coverage in mainstream and partisan outlets with archival material and interviews conducted with journalists and movement leaders, I show that much more than simple journalistic bias is at work. As the following overview of some of my main findings suggests, the ways in which groups resolve inescapable media dilemmas – and to what effect – depend on their own strategies and resources, as well as on the opportunities and obstacles offered by shifting political contexts.

Dilemma One: Whether to Use Mainstream Media to Build Influence

Mainstream media can help advocacy groups build political influence, but advocates rarely have direct control over how their ideas and organizations are covered. Groups with many ties and good reputations can influence mainstream coverage. Or, as an alternative, groups perceived as influential can rely on their own media outlets, which give them control over their messaging but limit the audiences they can reach.

- Planned Parenthood built its reputation on family planning, an organizational “brand” that allows the group to sidestep rancorous public debates and shape policy on controversial issues behind closed doors. Even when Planned Parenthood avoids direct portrayals in mainstream media, it can affect how issues are covered by using its clout to steer mainstream journalists to individuals and organizations that will represent issues in ways that Planned Parenthood prefers.
- Concerned Women for America’s founder, Beverly LaHaye, capitalized on her celebrity among conservative Christians to create radio and television programming that brought the organization’s ideas to – and effectively mobilized – sympathetic audiences. This strategic decision served the organization well because Republican presidents took notice of the group’s size and effectiveness. Although Concerned Women for America may not be the best known organization in America, it has gained a reputation for being able to influence policy.

Dilemma Two: Risks and Rewards of Responding to Negative Coverage

Negative coverage is unavoidable. The dilemma for advocacy groups is how to respond. Often there is a

tradeoff – between taking a hit to an organization’s image or to its reputation for clout.

- The National Right to Life Committee had to figure out how to deal with its radical ally, Operation Rescue, whose tactics reinforced negative public stereotypes about pro-lifers. For strategic reasons, leaders of the National Right to Life Committee remained silent on the fiery rhetoric and dramatic tactics of Operation Rescue. Although the group paid a public relations price for its silence, this maneuver allowed continued growth in the Committee’s coffers, membership, and political legitimacy.
- The National Organization for Women took a strong stand against groups like Operation Rescue that blocked entrances to abortion clinics. At first, dramatic standoffs made for great press and infused National Organization for Women with money and members at a critical juncture in its history. The National Organization for Women, in conjunction with abortion clinics, filed a class action law suit against Operation Rescue and other direct action groups. The group found itself trapped in a twenty-year long, ultimately losing legal battle, accompanied by repeated cycles of negative media attention – both of which diminished its reputation.

Dilemma Three: How to Deal with Losing Issues

Issues are rarely framed to the liking of advocates. The framing of an issue can be problematic when it has public support yet undermines a group’s agenda. When that happens, strategic silence can serve some groups well, especially if they have powerful political allies.

- Planned Parenthood’s market research found that the American public supported bans on late-term abortions and that there was little it could do to combat rhetoric around this issue without hurting its reputation. Since Bill Clinton, a strong pro-choice supporter who promised to veto any legislation that made it to his desk was in the White House, Planned Parenthood remained silent on the issue. When its leaders did speak publicly on the “partial birth abortion” issue, they challenged the language used in the debate.
- Paul Hill shot and killed an abortion provider and his body guard, proclaiming a “victory” for the pro-life movement. As the murders set off a firestorm, the National Right to Life Committee denounced Hill’s actions. Before his execution, Hill’s admirers promised to follow in his footsteps and pro-choice groups reminded the public the lengths pro-lifers would go to curtail the rights of women. Leaders of the National Right to Life Committee chose to be silent on this issue. They had nothing to gain – and much to lose – by reminding the public that they shared the same general goals as Hill.

Illuminating such basic media dilemmas that all advocacy groups face, my book details the strategic choices groups can make – and tracks the short- and long-term implications of their decisions. My research moves beyond simplistic debates over journalistic bias and outlines when and why advocacy groups might want to avoid media attention altogether.

Read more in Deana A. Rohlinger, *Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).