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**Abortion! Abortion! Read All About It!: News Coverage of Abortion
After the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* Decision**

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....3
Introduction.....4
Literature Review.....5
Methods.....12
Analysis.....14
Discussion.....35
Bibliography.....40

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Abstract

On June 24, 2022, the right to an abortion was effectively overturned in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (*Dobbs*). This case grapples with a Mississippi law that criminalizes abortion after the fetus reaches fifteen weeks, which was illegal under *Roe v. Wade* (*Roe*). This case reached the Supreme Court, giving the Court the opportunity to overrule *Roe* and deem the Mississippi law newly constitutional. This study examines patterns about abortion in 128 articles in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, one week after the passage of *Dobbs*. This study's main findings build upon and challenge scholars' pre-*Dobbs* patterns: abortion is still framed as a polarizing issue, mostly white men and white women are covered, and the language is more accurate and objective than scholars previously found, with some new terms. The results of these patterns are that the public still receives a warped image of abortion, and women of color—who abortion legislation impacts the most—are still erased from the narrative. This builds upon previous research, suggesting that these patterns will have similar impacts post-*Dobbs* as they did pre-*Dobbs*. Thus, there is still significant progress to be made to ensure that the public feels well-informed, empowered, and validated.

Keywords: Abortion, News, Reproductive Justice, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, *Roe v. Wade*

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Introduction

In 1973, the passage of a revolutionary Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, impacted the lives of many women and those of the Catholic faith. This law constitutionally protected a woman's right to an abortion, or rather, a doctor's right to provide an abortion. However, on June 24, 2022, this decision was effectively overturned in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (*Dobbs*). According to *Oyez*, this case grappled with the 2018 Mississippi "Gestational Age Act," which criminalizes abortion after the fetus reaches fifteen weeks. Jackson Women's Health Organization, one of the only abortion providers in Mississippi, challenged this law, claiming it was unconstitutional on the grounds of *Roe v. Wade* ("Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization," n.d.). Both lower courts affirmed the unconstitutionality of this law, on the grounds that the fetus is not viable—expected to live—at fifteen weeks. However, this case reached the Supreme Court due to an appeals process, which gave the Court the opportunity to overrule *Roe v. Wade* (*Roe*) and deem this law, newly, constitutional. Those who support *Dobbs* often argue on religious grounds of protecting the fetus's life. Meanwhile, opponents emphasize the impact that this decision has on women, particularly women of color. Reproductive Justice advocates claim this oppositional side, emphasizing the right to choice and the importance of understanding the barriers to choice that women of color face (Kapadia, 2022; Dubriwny and Siegfried, 2021).

In the years since *Roe* passed, scholars convey that news coverage of abortion has greatly varied in levels of objectivity and clarity, which influences the public (Hollar, 2007; Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). However, there is no literature regarding how abortion is covered in the news after the passage of *Dobbs*, at least partially due to the recency of this event. This study examines news coverage in *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, one week after the passage of

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Dobbs, to identify editorial patterns surrounding abortion. As this Supreme Court decision and its coverage affects all of America, it is essential to see what these leading news organizations say about abortion. The public's main source of information about the Court and its decisions is the news, and it provides a platform for the public to hold the Court accountable (Sill et al., 2013). While the Court passed *Dobbs*—a decision that diversely affects the public—the news coverage of abortion should be clear and objective. This study investigates how the news media covers the *Dobbs* decision, and what patterns in coverage may have changed since the decision passed. Although this study focuses on two primary news organizations, it provides a solid foundation for future research and comparison in patterns of coverage.

Literature Review

Previous Patterns in Coverage

Who is Represented

In order to analyze the current coverage of abortion, it is important to review the present literature on patterns of how the news has discussed abortion pre-*Dobbs*. Some of the patterns relate to who is most often represented in the news, the language used, and the framing abortion in the midst of a polarized debate. Moreover, the news has largely framed abortion as a women's issue (Vecera, 2011). Thus, one might expect women to be most represented as sources in news. However, much literature points to the fact that women are underrepresented and misrepresented in news coverage (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). A potential reasoning for this pattern of coverage is that most newsrooms are run by men and most news sources are men (Gibbons, 2022). According to Armstrong & Boyle (2011), journalists seek out men as sources despite “the uniqueness of the issue to women, to the feminist movement, and to the fact that women played a

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

significant role as participants on both sides of the issue” (p.171). This speaks to why “those most directly affected by the issue– ‘average women’--are underrepresented in news coverage” (p.171). This underrepresentation of average women makes it more difficult for the public to visualize how Supreme Court decisions, like *Dobbs*, affect their daily lives.

Before the passage of *Roe v. Wade*, the dominant narrative in society was anti-abortion (Wlezien & Goggin, 1993). However, this narrative has shifted, given the change in views of women and reproductive justice. This shift in opinion occurred in the 1980s, when the public became more supportive of legalized abortion as it was pre-*Dobbs* (Wlezien & Goggin, 1993). Wlezien & Goggin (1993) continue that there is a cyclical relationship between court activity, support for the status quo, and interest group activity. Interest groups included then, the “pro-life” and “pro-choice” camps. According to Armstrong & Boyle (2011), “Pro-choice groups were often professional and educated women, whereas pro-life groups—particularly in the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*—were dominated by the Catholic Church and predominantly women of lower education who were not employed outside the home” (p.157). Pre-*Dobbs*, those who were anti-abortion (pro-life) directly challenged the status quo, and thus were more negatively treated in news coverage (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). Armstrong & Boyle (2011) further argue that those who were anti-abortion went from “maintaining” a social policy to advocating for “social change,” whereas pro-abortion activists were promoting an “officially legal” decision after *Roe v. Wade* (p.157). They also note that “the more the group challenges the societal status quo, the more negatively it is treated in news coverage” (p.154). This brings us to question how different abortion groups will be portrayed in the news after *Dobbs*, given the shift in dominant narrative.

Regardless of viewpoint on the abortion “debate,” abortion patients and providers have repeatedly been villainized in the news media. Ellis (2022) coins the term “Abortion Monster,”

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

which is a monstrous figure “composed by anti-abortion rhetoric that dehumanizes abortion patients and providers” (p.70). Thus, this “monster” is a combination of news coverage, governmental policy, systemic inequalities, and the dominant narrative. Ellis (2022) suggests that the Abortion Monster results from cultural “anxieties related to reproduction in general, but particularly an anxiety related to the necessary reproduction of White progeny and supremacy” (p.70). In other words, cultural anxiety surrounding abortion both stems from and perpetuates systemic racism.

While women as a whole have been underrepresented or misrepresented in the media, women of color have fared much worse. According to the theory of *symbolic annihilation*, “portrayals of minority groups in mass media are generally superficial, distorted, or absent in news coverage compared to portrayals of dominant groups” (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011, p.155; Tuchman et al., 1978). In other words, women are either absent from news coverage entirely, or when they are present, it is mostly white women that have their voice heard, which misportrays the reality of abortions. Women of color are far more likely to obtain abortions, but less likely to appear in coverage about abortion (Khalek, 2014; Ellis, 2022). The implications of this is that the misrepresentation and/or lack of representation perpetuates indifference towards women of color, on an issue that hurts them most (Khalek, 2014).

Khalek (2014) highlights symbolic annihilation in coverage of abortion restrictions that surfaced in *The New York Times* in 2014, in which all six women quoted were white and privileged with education and/or jobs (p.5). At the same time, women of color are more likely to have unintended pregnancy, lower contraceptive use, and higher rates of abortion (Dehlendorf et al., 2013). Moreover, “white women account for just 36 percent of all abortions. Meanwhile, women of color are increasingly overrepresented with black women being three times as likely

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

and Latinas twice as likely ... to have an abortion” (Khalek, 2014, p.5). However, this data—and the systemic inequalities that contribute to these disparities—are largely missing from news coverage (Khalek, 2014). This allows societal institutions, like news organizations, to avoid unpacking systemic inequalities and contextual information that contribute to the vast gap in abortion rates. For instance, these differences in rates have been used to support the anti-abortion debate, but fail to account for systemic disparities that contribute to these rates (Dehlendorf et al., 2013). According to Dehlendorf et al. (2013), “these messages explicitly blame those providing abortion for targeting communities of color, [and] they also assign guilt to women of color who decide to have abortions by implying that they are falling victim to a racist conspiracy” (p.1772). Women of color who have abortions, in turn, face a double hit of absence from news coverage and shame in their own communities (Ellis, 2022). This reproduces the racism that fuels the Abortion Monster.

Language

In addition to the patterns of who is most often represented in news coverage surrounding abortion, the language used in this coverage is a prevalent pattern. Abortion is largely framed as a women’s issue that is mentioned rather than thoroughly discussed (Gibbons, 2022; Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). However, news coverage conveniently leaves out the reality of how one receives an abortion, such as the medical procedures, the cost, and the process one must go through (Hollar, 2007). This leads to a vast misunderstanding and underrepresentation of abortion prevalence, which excludes the public from the reality of abortions. This makes it harder for women in the US to get safe and legal abortions (Hollar, 2014). Ellis (2022) suggests that this could be due to a cultural anxiety about unprotected children or the fact that American society has yet to define when life begins. It also reinforces the idea that there should be shame

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

and secrecy around abortion (p.70). In fact, excluding the personal aspects of abortion from news coverage results in women being reluctant to speak publicly, in fear of misunderstanding or other consequences (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011, p.157). This furthers the underrepresentation of average women from coverage.

This dichotomy of abortion being present, but not adequately discussed in news coverage explains the patterns of incorrect terminology. Some of these terms include the politically-charged phrase, “late-term abortion” or “partial-birth abortion” (Dubriwny & Siegried, 2021; Hollar, 2007). These medically-inaccurate and otherwise meaningless phrases help frame the public understanding of abortion. They suggest a fetus’ closeness to “life,” thus further provoking a cultural anxiety (Dubriwny & Siegried, 2021, p.191). Other terms that “pro-life” language often influences includes using “child” or “unborn” when referring to the potential fetus-to-be-aborted (Hollar, 2007, p.10). Another term that often infiltrates news coverage about abortion is “viability,” which refers to the probability that a pregnancy will be “successful” to birth. There is an immense lack of clarity around viability in news coverage (Hollar, 2007, p.11). It pushes us to question whether this lack of clarity contributes to the access (or lack thereof) to an abortion. Understanding that this vague and/or incorrect language is prevalent is essential because “as long as the media continue to distort the debate with anti-choice terminology, the public will remain lost in a fog of misinformation and those working to protect women’s rights, health and lives will have a tough road ahead” (Hollar, 2007, p.12). This “tough road ahead” can be qualified as the overturn of *Roe*.

Polarized Issue

In order to maintain a presence in society, literature suggests that abortion “protests, media events, public relations efforts, and legislative and judicial activities have kept abortion a

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

salient and controversial political issue” (Perse et al., 1997, p.98). Because abortion has remained so prevalent in the public sphere, news continues to frame it as a “controversial political issue.” However, it is worth mentioning that public discussions are shaped by societal institutions, like the news. In fact, *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* are the two newspapers with the most influence on national political debates (Hollar, 2014). Furthermore, there exists a positive relationship between the amount of coverage of a topic and the public’s perception of it (Perse et al., 1997). Thus, this mutually-contributive nature of the public and the press suggests why abortion has found itself amidst an extremely polarizing debate. This polarization is seen in news networks, abortion camps, political parties, and even women. For instance, *Fox News* is known for opposing the legalization of abortion, which suggests their bias in coverage. Meanwhile, *MSNBC* and *CNN* have favored legalization (Gibbons, 2022). This polarization in news coverage contributes to a potential skewed perspective of abortion and its place in society. Women are seen on both sides of the issue, both being pro-abortion and anti-abortion (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). Regardless of the method of polarization, literature repeatedly points to the divide in society surrounding abortion. This is important, because while news coverage mostly focuses on the polarized debate, women of color are continuously erased from the narrative (Khalek, 2014). In turn, this perpetuates the inaccurate representation of abortion rates and systemic inequalities by failing to address them.

Supreme Court News Coverage

The Supreme Court, the highest level of the United States judiciary branch, is made up of nine members who rule on decisions based on interpretations of the Constitution. While the public relies on the press to provide objective, clear, and comprehensive coverage of the

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Supreme Court and its decisions, extensive literature suggests that that is not the case. There is a problem in news coverage of the Supreme Court that likely permeates into coverage of their decisions like *Dobbs*. According to Sullivan and Tilley (2020), the Supreme Court is the least visible branch of the government. This secrecy is evidenced in the fact that “most of the Justices ... traditionally have chosen to keep a low profile and seldom have given interviews” (p. 390). Further, there exists a lack of public knowledge about the court, a lack of interest in its activities, and in turn, an inability to understand how it affects daily life (Johnson & Socker, 2012). In other words, the public, press, and Supreme Court have a very strained and complicated relationship that limits the public’s understanding and heightens the Supreme Court’s secrecy. Previous *New York Times* Supreme Court correspondent Lisa Greenhouse writes extensively about this problem in Supreme Court news coverage. She suggests that the public has a very weak understanding of the Court, and she argues the press and the court are to blame (Greenhouse, 1996). While other United States government branches interact heavily with the press, the Supreme Court—which is often the battleground for some of the most influential decisions—avoids this cooperation. In order to tackle the strained relationship between the Court, press, and public, the press and Court need to have a healthy mutual relationship, since they both want to promote democracy (Greenhouse, 1996).

Although journalists attempt to be clear and objective in their coverage, they make choices about which stories to cover and how to cover them. According to Sullivan & Tilley (2020), in news coverage, these choices can take two forms— “agenda-setting” and “framing” (p. 392). Journalists agenda-set by choosing which stories they cover and do not cover. Framing is how the journalists interpret and communicate the issues to the public. These prevalent biases in coverage “can dramatically influence the public’s understanding of the institution and their

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

support for it” (Sullivan & Tilley, 2020, p. 394). The news is the main source of information about the Court to the public, ensuring that they are held accountable to the public (Sill et al., 2013). Therefore, it is essential to evaluate how the news covers major decisions that impact the lives of many. Sullivan & Tilley (2020) further found that journalists typically politically-categorize justices and attribute the case decision to a win or loss for respective political parties. This is important because the public “does not believe that the Justices should mimic the preferences of partisan groups outside the Court in its decision-making” (p. 439). However, this understanding by the public is reinforced by news coverage of the Court. This can perpetuate the public’s lack of confidence and lack of trust in the court, which is especially important when the Court makes decisions such as *Dobbs*.

Methods

The objective of this study is to find patterns in news coverage of abortion throughout the week following the passage of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, particularly in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Aside from the fact that these are the two main news organizations that report on the Supreme Court, *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* are well-respected by public and private institutions as objective, clear, and comprehensive news. In fact, *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* are the two newspapers with the most influence on national political debates as well (Hollar, 2014). I turn to the coverage that occurs within a week after the passage of *Dobbs* in order to assess the immediate ways in which *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* cover abortion in this new reality. I use the patterns found in research to compare with previous studies, see if anything has changed, and highlight potential implications of these patterns. Using an online coding software program Taguette, I highlight and

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

organize patterns found in 128 articles from both news organizations: 63 in *The New York Times* and 65 in *The Washington Post*. Then, I analyze how these patterns are framed and discussed, and further, how they may or may not compare to patterns found in news coverage pre-*Dobbs*. The methods in this study build upon and/or challenge previous research, convey potential implications that affect the fabric of America, and suggest a cast for how society views abortion.

Furthermore, I use the Reproductive Justice framework to guide this study because of its relationship to the passage of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. The Reproductive Justice framework (RJ) was started by a community of Black women in 1994 to approach the reproductive healthcare needs of populations that were often overlooked (Kapadia, 2022). The main elements of this framework are that all people should have the right to decide if and when they have children, the conditions in which they give birth, and the conditions in which they raise their children. These conditions should be equipped “with the necessary social supports in safe environments and healthy communities and without fear of violence from individuals or the government” (Kapadia, 2022, p.1107). In other words, RJ emphasizes the right to choose, but also the importance of recognizing barriers that may lessen a person’s access to “choice.”

One component RJ activists often emphasize is the right to safe abortions, because “all people should have the right to decide if and when they have children” (Luna & Luker, 2022). However, “With the US Supreme Court’s decision to strike down *Roe v. Wade* on June 24, 2022, nine states have already banned abortion care” (Kapadia, 2022, p.1108). Criminalizing abortion runs in opposition to the principles of the RJ framework. RJ has also been largely missing from framing the public understanding of abortion (Kapadia, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative that it carries into this study.

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

The RJ framework takes an intersectional approach to women of color, which challenges the institutional racism, classism and sexism present in systems, like healthcare and media (Luna & Luker, 2013). Similar to how white women are mostly represented in the news surrounding abortion, the RJ movement is also “dominated by White middle-class women who were unable—or unwilling—to recognize that protecting legal abortion leads to the exclusion of other reproductive issues” (Luna & Luker, 2013, p.338). This whitewashing of abortion and reproductive rights activism are reflected in news coverage and thus the public’s understanding of both. Although it is helpful that pro-abortion organizations have expanded RJ, understanding its roots and the context in which it was developed is essential. This framework, therefore, guides this study’s research and analysis.

Analysis

Polarized Issue

As abortion has remained a hotly-debated topic for at least the last fifty years, it makes sense that news coverage would reflect that. Pre-*Dobbs* research shows that the opposing sides of views on abortion are framed as polarized (Perse et al., 1997; Hollar, 2014). Similarly, one *New York Times* article specifically highlights that same framing: “The Supreme Court’s decision calls abortion ‘a profound moral issue on which Americans hold sharply conflicting views.’ But while Americans have become more likely to say that abortion is morally acceptable, the issue is very much a political one” (Zernike, 2022). Even as the half-century law, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, the polarized framing—as in, sharply dichotomous in their stances—of the abortion issue persists. Consistent with previous literature (Perse et al., 1997; Hollar, 2014), the majority of news

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

coverage in this study focused on the polarized debate of abortion, through political parties, states, and camps of people.

Between Political Parties

The political polarization of abortion is achieved through tagging political spokespeople with their party affiliation, generalizing political parties' views of abortion, including quotes from political officials, and linking quotes from certain parties to a certain stance on abortion. Much news coverage frames Democrats as pro-abortion and Republicans as anti-abortion. For instance, a *New York Times* article starts, "Democrats used the ruling to criticize Republicans as threats to women and their health care providers...." (Paybarah, 2022). This statement demonstrates the political polarization between parties, as the author frames Democrats as "criticizing" Republicans for the *Dobbs* decision. Further, A *Washington Post* article mentions, "The conservative movement had won its nearly 50-year battle to overturn the right to an abortion," which directly pins Republicans and Democrats against each other in the abortion debate (Roubein & Shamma, 2022). A cultural synonym for the Republican party is the conservative party, while Democrats are seen as liberal. Therefore, by saying that the "conservative movement had won" the battle to overturn abortion, the article specifically links anti-abortion sentiment to the Republican party. These two instances demonstrate the vast framing of Democrats as pro-abortion in direct opposition to Republicans who are framed as anti-abortion. By directly posing these political groups and abortion views as dichotomous, news coverage continues to frame abortion as a polarizing issue. This pushes the public—who subscribe to these political parties—to latch onto the corresponding abortion views. In turn, abortion continues to be framed amidst a polarizing debate, which draws attention away from women of color and the realities of obtaining an abortion (Khalek, 2014).

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

The framing of abortion as politically-polarizing is strengthened through the use of quotes from political officials about their views. The article “Democrats Turn to Donors After the Abortion Decision, and Republicans Follow Suit — But With a Different Message,” published in *The New York Times*, is a typical example of how these elements come together. After stating that Democrats rushed to donors after *Roe* was overturned, the author includes quotes from various Democratic representatives, which further links Democrats to pro-abortion sentiment. One Democratic candidate of Ohio, Tim Ryan is quoted saying, ““My opponent J.D. Vance called overturning *Roe* a ‘victory’ and said pregnancy from rape is merely ‘inconvenient.’ It’s disgusting. I’m disgusted, angry, and scared for my kids”” (Gabriel, 2022). The author’s inclusion of a quote from Democrat Ryan directly calling out his Republican opponent for his comments about the *Dobbs* decision furthers the political and polarizing sphere in which abortion is situated in news coverage. After this instance, the author includes a quote from a Republican representative who is “attacking Congressional Democrats’ efforts to codify *Roe* in federal law” (Gabriel, 2022). By including a quote from both Republican and Democratic representatives, the author claims objectivity through fair representation of both political parties. However, these quotes continue to frame each political party as firm in their views about abortion. This perpetuates the polarization of the abortion debate, which Perse et al. (1997) mentioned in their literature. Of the 128 articles, this political and polarized frame of abortion was used in every article that mentioned politics. Moreover, sixty-nine articles frame abortion as a polarized issue, which speaks to the high frequency in which abortion is also framed as political.

By including quotes from government officials, abortion remains a prevalent hot-topic between political parties. Further, news coverage of abortion also points to further polarization

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

between states that are strongly politically-affiliated. As many states were quick to outlaw abortion, consistent with the Supreme Court ruling, about half of the other states worked to strengthen people's right to an abortion. This leads to a patchwork of state-by-state laws that geographically-determine who can get an abortion and where, thus perpetuating inequalities to access that are already prevalent. Much news coverage in this study points to states' individual rights as a Republican argument for *Dobbs*—in fact, states' rights are mentioned 113 times across the 128 articles. These instances speak to the high volume of articles that focused on the state-by-state patchwork of abortion laws. In fact, one *New York Times* article mentioned that *Dobbs* could lead to more polarization than fifty years ago: “The Supreme Court sent the issue of abortion back to the states in an even more polarized era than when *Roe v. Wade* was introduced” (Zernike, 2022). And, while “The West Coast of the United States is going to stand strong,” roughly half of the United States will make it nearly impossible to obtain an abortion, according to one *New York Times* article (Hubler, 2022). The legislative decisions of these states often match their political affiliation, with Republican (red) states being anti-abortion and Democratic (blue) states being pro-abortion (Roubein & Shammas, 2022). The vast inclusion of this state-polarization and political framing results in the political polarization of abortion views remaining the main focus in news coverage of abortion. This results in an underrepresentation of the reality of obtaining an abortion as well as of women of color, who are still largely missing from the narrative. Moreover, it suggests to the public that they should solve *Dobbs*-related issues through political actions, while legislation caused this polarization in the first place.

Between Abortion Camps

To preface this section, the term *abortion camps* refers to the opposing pro-abortion and anti-abortion collectives of people. In order for abortion to take on such a major role in politics,

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

the press must suggest to the public that it is an issue that they should care about (Perse et al., 1997). The continual focus on abortion camps in this study's news coverage suggests that abortion remains a controversial issue amongst the public, which results in its reflection in news coverage. As found in previous literature, American people either subscribe to a "pro-life" (anti-abortion) or "pro-choice" (pro-abortion) perspective (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). These camps gained much traction throughout the past fifty years and allowed well-respected politicians and religious figures to bolster their respective camps. However, with that added support also came more coverage of the camps as sharply dichotomous in views. For instance, one *New York Times* article quoted a leader from South Dakota's Right to Life group (anti-abortion) and in the same article used a quote from a board member of a Tennessee reproductive rights group (pro-abortion). The author marked the transition of quotes by stating "On the other side..." (Zernike, 2022). By directly juxtaposing the two organizations on two "sides," this article continues to polarize abortion camps.

Furthermore, two *New York Times* articles, "How Women who Oppose Abortion are Reacting to the Court's Decision" and "How Women who Support Abortion Rights are Reacting to the News," polarize abortion between women who support and oppose abortion (Williams et al., 2022; Gaffney et al., 2022). These two titles demonstrate how abortion camps are sharply categorized. Both articles include quotes from various women about how and why the *Dobbs* decision affected them. This allows readers to decide which words more strongly resonate with them, and easily join in on the polarized understanding of abortion. However, this also challenges a previous pattern found by Armstrong & Boyle in which "average women" were largely missing from news coverage (2011). Yet, there was little mention of social identities, beyond gender, in either of the articles. One article included a quote from a Black woman, which

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

helps combat the previous erasure of women of color from the abortion narrative (Gaffney et al., 2022). However, the inclusion of only one woman of color also misrepresents the reality of abortion, and mirrors the findings of Khalek (2014) and Dehlendorf et al. (2013). They noted that symbolic annihilation was present in abortion news coverage, where most women quoted in an article about abortion restrictions pre-*Dobbs* were white, privileged, educated, and with jobs. At the same time, women of color are more likely to have unintended pregnancy, lower contraceptive use, and higher rates of abortion. These are especially important statistics, considering the criminalization of abortion through *Dobbs*. The vast polarized framing of these two camps, coupled with the immense amount of politically-polarized coverage, leaves little room for unpacking vital contextual information and systemic inequalities that resulted from *Dobbs* and the corresponding reactions. Previous research noted that news coverage that mostly focuses on the polarized debate often erases women of color from the narrative (Khalek, 2014). The continuation of this pattern suggests that there has yet to be change in addressing women of color and the systemic inequalities present in abortion rates and care.

Who Is Most Represented and How They Are Represented

Although men previously dominated most of the journalist sphere when writing articles on abortion pre-*Dobbs* (Gibbons, 2022; Armstrong & Boyle, 2011), the coverage in this study was written and researched by both men and women. This perhaps contributes to the slightly more diverse coverage of abortion regarding those quoted, mentioned, and referenced. For instance, as abortion is still heavily framed as a polarizing issue, men and women are found speaking on both sides of the debate. Those present in articles include political figures, medical professionals, religious figures, activists and everyday citizens. Quoting individuals demonstrates

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

the vast amount of people involved, but also supplements and challenges arguments about the previous framing of abortion news coverage. Previous coverage included representation of mostly white men and white women. This study directly addresses these patterns.

Political Figures

The political framing of abortion suggests a reason why political figures are prevalent in news coverage of abortion post-*Dobbs*. As men dominate the political sphere, it makes sense that they are more often quoted in articles about political decisions. Political men are often quoted on the anti-abortion side of the debate, which frames these men as mostly anti-abortion. For instance, in a *Washington Post* article, the author includes information about two men, who are both Republican political figures: “Just moments after the Supreme Court released its decision on Friday, Florida state Rep. Anthony Sabatini (R) wrote to Gov. Ron DeSantis, urging the Republican to call a special session that would allow the legislature to pass a six-week abortion ban” (Kitchener, 2022). By including information about politicians—who urge more abortion restrictions than *Dobbs*—news coverage maintains the politicization of abortion. The inclusion of their parties politicizes the abortion debate. Aside from quoting state political figures, news coverage also references and quotes the Supreme Court and President Biden. As the Supreme Court and President are the highest government roles, the inclusion of them when discussing abortion continues to frame it as an important political issue. It also demonstrates the immense impact that the *Dobbs* decision had on society. Most of these men who are political figures, however, are also white, which perpetuates the lack of diverse coverage.

Because abortion is framed as a “women’s issue,” it also makes sense that women politicians are present in news coverage (Gibbons, 2022; Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). This study frames women politicians as more on the pro-abortion side of the debate than the anti-abortion

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

side. This may push women to subscribe to certain political parties as a result. The political figures present in news coverage are most often the Vice President Kamala Harris, state governors, and people running for office. This maintains the discussion of abortion in a political sphere, and determines women's reproduction as a subject to be governed. For instance, in a *New York Times* article, Vice President Harris says, "You have the power to elect leaders who will defend and protect your rights" (Kanno-Youngs, 2022). This specifically places abortion as a politically-debatable topic, but also demonstrates the disconnect between the judicial and executive branches. This quote also points to the way in which the political parties utilize abortion as an advancement tool in their political agendas.

Both of these instances demonstrate the pattern, in which political figures often urge the public to solve their abortion legislation qualms and confusion through more political actions. Moreover, the framing of women political figures as pro-abortion and men political figures as anti-abortion illustrates a gendered and political binary, which will inherently be polarizing due to the controversial nature of abortion. However, this coverage challenges Armstrong & Boyle's previous pattern, in which journalists mostly sought out men as sources for abortion-related news coverage. As a result, women start to gain more recognition for "the fact that [they] played a significant role as participants on both sides of the issue" (2011, p.171). Although women hold differing views on this polarized abortion debate, the repeated inclusion of political figures in news coverage keeps abortion in an unpredictable political environment. This pattern also builds upon the previous pattern, in which abortion remains touched on and mentioned rather than thoroughly discussed (Gibbons, 2022). The press prioritizes political figures, urging the public to take political action against or for *Dobbs*, which contributes to the vast misrepresentation of the reality of an abortion as well as lack of public understanding of it. It also suggests that the public

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

fix their qualms through subscribing to a political system that caused the qualms in the first place.

Activists

As the abortion debate is centered in a political atmosphere, activists from abortion camps are referenced and quoted as well. As a polarizing issue, these activists are usually extremely pro-abortion or anti-abortion. According to previous literature, pro-life (anti-abortion) activists were often religious, lower educated women, who were not employed outside of their homes (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011, p. 172). However, post-*Dobbs* news coverage both challenges and builds upon this previous pattern, while also posing the camps as dichotomous. Many articles in the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* included quotes from well-established, and higher-up anti-abortion advocates. For example, a *New York Times* article quotes Margaret H. Hartshorn, the chairwoman of the Heartbeat International Board, which is a network of anti-abortion pregnancy centers: “I believe God will use this to help us to build a greater culture of life, that in 50 years no woman will ever consider abortion” (Dias, 2022). By including this information about Hartshorn, her career, and the organization, the author counters previous ways in which anti-abortion activists were framed. This moves away from the previous pattern of anti-abortion activists being more negatively treated in news coverage as well (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). As a result, the question of how different abortion groups will be portrayed in the news after *Dobbs*, given the shift in dominant narrative, suggests that journalists are trying to portray anti-abortion and pro-abortion camps more fairly and equally.

However, anti-abortion activists are still heavily framed as religious, building upon Armstrong & Boyle’s (2011) finding. The linkage of the Catholic religion to anti-abortion sentiment further frames the anti-abortion camp as dominated by the Catholic Church. News

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coverage includes quotes from religious figures about their response to *Dobbs* in order to maintain that connection to religion. Of the 128 articles, religion appears nineteen times. In all nineteen instances, there is a direct linkage of anti-abortion sentiment to the Catholic faith. This strengthens the religious affiliation of being anti-abortion. A *New York Times* article says, “Ultimately, abolitionists believe they are fighting a holy Christian mission, answerable to the God they worship” (Dias, 2022). This furthers the framing of anti-abortion camps as religious, perpetuating Armstrong & Boyle’s previous pattern (2011). While Christian principles have dominated American society for the past centuries, maintaining the religious connection to abortion allows Christianity to remain in the public eye. There is a mix of men and women when referring to religious figures, but the authors would often frame them as grateful, incredibly religious, and devoted. For example, one *New York Times* article quotes an archbishop, William E. Lori: “It is a moment of gratitude to the Lord, and gratitude to so many people, in the church and beyond the church, who have worked and prayed so hard for this day to come” (Dias, 2022). By including quotes from anti-abortion religious figures about reactions to the debate, news coverage further links anti-abortion sentiment to the Catholic church.

While anti-abortion activists previously were depicted as uneducated and religious housewives, pro-choice (pro-abortion) activists in news coverage were often professional and educated women (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). This study builds upon that pattern, since much of the research discussing these activists comes from well-respected organizations, like the ACLU or Guttmacher Institute. For instance, in one *Washington Post* article, the author discusses the helpful post-*Dobbs* actions of Planned Parenthood, a notoriously pro-abortion organization: “Planned Parenthood and other abortion clinics are doing what they can to accommodate as many patients as possible” (Kitchener, 2022). By framing clinics like Planned Parenthood in a

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

helpful and beneficial manner, this study demonstrates that pro-abortion activists remain portrayed in a positive, professional and educated manner. In fact, a *New York Times* article quotes the President and Chief Executive of Planned Parenthood of Utah, Karrie Galloway, as saying, ““In one terrible moment, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, and Utahns’ power to control their own bodies, lives, and personal medical decisions was threatened”” (Holpuch, 2022). These examples, among others, demonstrate that post-*Dobbs* news coverage continues to portray pro-abortion activists as professional, educated women.

Aside from the educational and professional statuses of both camps, a new pattern found in the coverage was that these activists were very emotional from the *Dobbs* decision. Previous literature rarely discussed emotions or public reactions to political decisions. Post-*Dobbs* coverage challenges this pattern by focusing on the emotions of pro-abortion and anti-abortion camps. A *Washington Post* article says, “For supporters of abortion rights, there was grief and rage and grim determination” (Slater, 2022). Moreover, these disappointed and angry activists are often directly juxtaposing their anti-abortion counterparts. For instance, this *Washington Post* article also says, “For abortion opponents, the Supreme Court’s decision Friday to overturn *Roe v. Wade* ... was met with celebration. There were tears of joy, grateful prayers, holidays from work” (Slater, 2022). Referencing anti-abortion activists as joyful and pro-abortion activists as angry further perpetuates this polarizing debate. However, the emotions of each camp allows the abortion debate to be more personalized, rather than the common politicization of abortion.

Women

Armstrong & Boyle found that average women were vastly underrepresented in news coverage (2011). Although post-*Dobbs* coverage presents more everyday women, they are still mostly white women. When talking about abortion, most of the articles would discuss a woman’s

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

choice as the rationale for keeping abortion legal. Women's choice is discussed across thirty-three articles. For instance, in a *New York Times* article about California's abortion legislation actions post-*Dobbs*, the author discusses a woman's right to choose: "The legislative blitz reflects California's widespread support of a woman's right to choose when and whether to bear children" (Hubler, 2022). This maintains abortion as a women's issue, by establishing ownership of the choice to women. However, these articles fail to elaborate on this idea of choice, and if it extends to all women or just those with privilege. The idea of a woman's choice is also prevalent in multiple articles that quote President Biden's response to *Dobbs*. One *Washington Post* article specifically states that President Biden emphasized "elect[ing] more senators and representatives to codify a woman's right to choose into federal law" (Itkowitz, et al., 2022). Although news coverage mentions women's freedom of choice, these instances demonstrate how politics work are framed as the solution to regain that reproductive choice. This further maintains abortion in a political sphere, and allows mostly white men to govern women's reproduction.

Even though some articles in this study expand language to make *Dobbs* obvious in its effects to everyday women, white women are, as Khalek (2014) found, still most often represented. While women of color have been, and will be, most impacted by the abortion decision, their underrepresentation in news coverage continues (Dehlendorf et al., 2013). Some articles mentioned that women of color were the most impacted. However, there are few instances in which women of color are quoted, outside of a *Washington Post* article specifically about, "Women of Color [who] Will be Most Impacted by the End of Roe, Experts Say" (Branigin & Chery, 2022). This specific article counters the previous pattern by providing a voice to women of color, who were entirely erased. A *New York Times* article, written by a

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

woman of color, also counters this previous notion by including a woman of color, Loretta J. Ross: “now a professor at Smith College, as an activist and a Black feminist ... ‘I went from being a scared teenager to being an active teenage mother ... so that had a definite impact on my consciousness and it separated me from the rest of the kids in school’” (Haque, 2022). By quoting a woman of color, establishing her credibility and professionalism, Fahima Haque counters the previous ways in which women of color were framed in the abortion narrative. She even gives space for emotions, contextual information, and systemic inequalities which directly counters the previous lack of coverage for women of color. Haque challenges this pattern by placing Ross at the center of her narrative, which is not even an article about specifically women of color, to illustrate the impact. However, this was one of the few instances where a woman of color is portrayed this way, and white women continue to make up the majority of quotes and references in post-*Dobbs* coverage.

Due to the whitewashing of the Reproductive Justice movement among various other feminist movements, most of the women quoted remain white women, as Khalek (2014) first argued. In a *New York Times* article, business executives are interviewed about their policies post-*Dobbs*. Most of the people quoted were men, and the women quoted were all white. Dina Fierro of NARS says, “‘It’s a doomsday scenario if individuals have to bring their health care choices to their employers’” (Goldberg, 2022). This coverage limits the effects of *Dobbs* to professionals, and this—coupled with representing mostly white women—propels the narrative that mostly white women are affected by legal abortion decisions, which is not the case. It also perpetuates the underrepresentation of everyday women who are most impacted by the *Dobbs* decision (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). Another instance in which only white women are quoted is in a *Washington Post* article about blocking anti-abortion legislation in Louisiana. Whether it be

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

the judge, the pro-abortion camp, or the anti-abortion camp, all three women referenced and quoted are white (Wagner & Kitchener, 2022). Therefore, this pattern of limiting women of color from the abortion narrative perpetuates the notion that the *Dobbs* decision primarily impacts white women. However, there is some movement in a more inclusive direction, where women of color are represented in a bit more coverage. Although news coverage includes political figures, religious figures, and people from both abortion camps, the overall takeaway is that white men and white women are still the most covered, which suggests that similar impacts pre-*Dobbs* as post-*Dobbs* could ensue. Such impacts include women of color still not receiving vital information that affects them and their livelihoods the most (Khalek, 2014).

Language

The language that journalists use in their news coverage can have a significant impact on the framing of issues, public understanding, and society as a whole. When discussing abortion, activists, government officials, and citizens alike have subscribed to a wealth of language, without necessarily considering the impact of it. In fact, many lawmakers have strategically used language to frame abortion in a certain way. Previous research noted that much anti-abortion language, such as a “partial-birth abortion” or the more current “Heartbeat Bill,” suggest a fetus’ closeness to “life,” provoking further cultural anxiety about abortion (Dubriwny & Siegried, 2021, p. 191). This language worked to generate fear and stigma around abortion, as well as frame anti-abortion sentiment as heroic and life-saving. Aside from politically charged and/or unclear terminology, other patterns included abortion being framed as a women’s issue and the language misrepresenting the reality of an abortion (Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). All of these patterns appear in this study.

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Misrepresenting Reality of Abortion

Previous literature noted that news coverage of abortion pre-*Dobbs* contained much politically-charged language that misrepresented the reality of an abortion. According to Hollar (2007), news coverage conveniently left out the reality of how one receives an abortion, such as the medical procedures, the cost, and the process one must go through. Whether avoiding the word abortion or failing to give the cost, in post-*Dobbs* coverage, this pattern remains. For example, a *New York Times* article states, “In Wisconsin, Michigan and other states, abortion bans that were long considered dormant could determine if access to the procedure survives the overturning of *Roe*” (Bosman, 2022). In these same states, however, access to medication abortion—not only procedure—is on the line. As this study highlights that news coverage often refers to abortion as a “procedure,” this term actually misrepresents the reality of an abortion and its related legislation. Failing to give more information on this procedure also frames abortion as a more severe and unsafe practice, thus increasing public anxiety and stigma. Of the 128 articles coded, “abortion” is replaced by “the procedure” six times, which suggests that this is not a major pattern, but one for which to account. By failing to provide further elaboration on types of abortion that are subject to legislation, readers still lack an adequate picture of abortion and ways to get one. By leaving out important information, such as what the procedure entails, if medication abortion is legal and accessible, and the costs, the current study builds upon Hollar’s (2007) research. This unclear picture may lead to a vast misunderstanding of abortion prevalence, which excludes the public from the reality of abortions. This can make it harder for women in the United States to get safe and legal abortions, especially with further limiting legislation from *Dobbs*.

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Another way in which news coverage continues to misrepresent the reality of an abortion is by leaving out the average costs. Throughout all of this study's 128 articles, there is not one mention of the average price of an abortion. One *New York Times* article discussed the average price of emergency contraceptive pills: "at least two major pharmacies put limits on purchases or deliveries of the pills, which typically cost \$10 to \$50" (Goldberg & Creswell, 2022). Although providing the cost of these pills is important, there is still no frame of reference regarding procedure abortions, which are far more targeted under *Dobbs*. This is especially interesting when compared to an article about how vasectomies are subject to change post-*Dobbs*. In a *Washington Post* article about men getting vasectomies to help their partners avoid needing abortions, the author writes, "Nisi, who is between jobs and doesn't have health insurance, said he is paying out-of-pocket for the procedure, which costs just under \$600 at Stein and Curington's practice" (Venkataramanan, 2022). The dichotomy between providing an average cost for a vasectomy, though just once, versus no articles about abortion cost is fascinating. It may communicate the ways in which society, and news coverage, prioritizes the healthcare needs of men. Regardless, by avoiding the average cost, news coverage post-*Dobbs* continues to misrepresent the reality of an abortion.

Representing a "New" Reality of Abortion

Although much coverage in this study builds upon the previous misrepresentation of abortion, another pattern emerges in post-*Dobbs* coverage where journalists discuss a "new" reality of getting abortion. Beyond confusion about the procedure or medication itself, people are also confused about where it is legal to get an abortion, if abortion pills are legal, what the consequences are, and if they will have their privacy honored. Thus, instead of discussing information such as the cost and steps of an abortion, news coverage focuses on the confusing

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

nature of state-by-state laws, legislation, and technological privacy. Much of the news coverage discusses crossing state lines to get abortions, which frames the states in a political manner. For instance, a *Washington Post* article says that the patchwork of “abortion laws will be decided by each state, giving greater significance to races there this year” (Linskey & Itkowitz, 2022), immediately placing abortion in a political sphere. This removes the private and personal elements of abortion, further cementing them into a public and political discussion.

Aside from framing the new reality of abortion as political-based on state laws—it is also framed as confusing for everybody. Even more, with a patchwork of state-by-state laws, “Across much of the country, the future of abortion access is uncertain” (Kitchener, 2022). According to Caroline Kitchener’s *Washington Post* article, the *Dobbs* ruling leaves many even more confused than before regarding their access to abortion. Further, a *Washington Post* article discusses how abortion pills are affected post-*Dobbs*: “A gray market in abortion pills is expected to expand, as advocates and patients arrange for hard-to-detect shipments to be sent via mail to states with abortion bans.” (Bogage & Rowland, 2022). Due to the unclear legality of abortion pills, specifically dependent on states, news coverage points to the additional illegal action that could ensue. They also highlight the polarization between state laws and how people are working to combat that. Thus, news coverage sheds light on the confusing nature that qualifies this “new” reality. Explicitly highlighting collective confusion allows journalists to evade scrutiny if they predict or state information regarding the legality of abortion incorrectly. Further, the statement of confusion surrounding abortion may further push people away from trying to understand it, which results in even more erasure of the reality of abortion. However, the statement of confusion may also push government officials to make more clear legal decisions regarding access to abortion. Moreover, even without a strong understanding of abortion, political officials

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

still urge citizens to vote based on their abortion views. This builds upon the previous pattern in which abortion is touched on but not thoroughly discussed, which results in fewer people in the US having access to safe abortions (Gibbons, 2022). It also suggests that the public should alleviate their confusion through political action, while legislation initially caused the confusion.

Privacy has always been a topic of discussion in the abortion debate, specifically as *Roe* argued for the right to an abortion on the grounds of privacy. One new pattern identified in news coverage post-*Dobbs* is the discussion of privacy in a more current, technological atmosphere. Many articles, in fact, warn about the threats to abortion-related technological privacy. For instance, a *Washington Post* article states, “Everything you do online is already tracked. That information has become even more sensitive if you’re seeking an abortion in the United States” (Kelly et al., 2023). The authors clearly state that people no longer have that access to reproductive privacy—that was granted with *Roe*—when it comes to online activity. Vast online activity is a newer development that happened during *Roe*, which explains why it is more discussed in news coverage post-*Dobbs*. However, the framing of privacy is seemingly that it does not exist anymore. The journalists urge caution, but essentially provoke public anxiety about engaging with technology; anything—from text messages, period tracking apps, and search history—can be used to incriminate abortion seekers and providers. Technology can provide the public with ample abortion-related information. However, the tracking of abortion-related searches may dissuade the public from seeking out this vital information. This may result in access to fewer safer abortions. Further, it may also decrease the trust the public has in the government, as previously-private information can be used against the public.

New Terminology

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

The language used in post-*Dobbs* news coverage of abortion proves to be less politically-charged and a bit more clear to the public than previously. Hollar stated that the presence of this vague and/or incorrect language keeps the public “lost in a fog of misinformation” (2007). Whether it be providing brief definitions for medical/legal terminology or putting quotation marks around anti-abortion language, news coverage attempts to claim more objectivity in their language. There are also common phrases that are used in much of the coverage, like “trigger laws” and “exceptions.” Trigger laws are state laws that were set in place about abortion pre-*Roe* that automatically go into effect again post-*Dobbs* (unless states specifically block them). Some articles assume that people already understand what trigger laws are, while others provide definitions or put the term in quotation marks to signify its newness. For example, a *New York Times* article says, “In Idaho, North Dakota and Texas, officials said they would wait the 30 days stipulated in their laws for their so-called trigger laws to take effect, banning abortion” (Bosman, 2022). Including the phrase “so-called” in front of trigger laws in this article furthers the notion that people may not have known about them prior to the *Dobbs* decision. Another *Washington Post* article includes quotation marks around the term, in which “ban” substitutes “law”: “A ‘trigger ban’ is scheduled to take effect 30 days from last week’s Supreme Court decision” (Kitchener & Kornfield, 2022). Referring to trigger laws as a “ban” communicates the goal of these laws. “Trigger law” appears in thirty-four articles, and “ban” replaces “law” in twenty articles. Further, the quotation marks around “trigger ban” again support the notion that these laws are a new concept for people to grasp. In fact, one *New York Times* article is even titled “What are Abortion Trigger Laws and Which States Have Them?,” which specifically teaches the term and explains the new reality of abortion to the public (Jiménez, 2022).

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Another phrase common in post-*Dobbs* news coverage is discussing the “exceptions” around banning abortion. In other words, states that outlaw abortion may provide exceptions to *Dobbs* based on circumstance. These exceptions are typically to save the mother’s life or in the case of rape and/or incest. Fifty-two articles discuss these exceptions, which illustrates the importance of these exceptions to abortion legislation and access. Although rape and incest are their own legal matters, they are often found linked to state’s abortion laws. However, not all states provide exceptions, and the exceptions that do exist, communicate what American society deems as acceptable sexual relations and an acceptable abortion. For instance, a *New York Times* article discusses the new Wisconsin state abortion law, which “includes exceptions for an abortion that is necessary to save the mother’s life, but does not make exceptions for cases of rape or incest” (Bosman, 2022). This framing of abortion to include exceptions demonstrates the political sphere in which abortion is situated. By specifically criminalizing various aspects of abortion, the government can continue to monitor its presence. It also assumes a very simplistic approach to these exceptions and abortion in itself. Rape and incest are very complicated issues that often take months, if not years, to investigate. With a timely issue, like an abortion, these exceptions fail to account for slow government movement and legal action, especially for pregnant people. Further, how does the government or medical provider determine these exceptions? Is it reliant on the patient to report rape and/or incest? What if the medical provider doesn’t believe them? Does the medical provider determine when an abortion is necessary for the mother’s life? These are all vital questions that these exceptions to abortion criminalization fail for which to account.

Politically-Charged Language

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

While previous research demonstrated that terms like “partial-birth abortion” and “unborn” were politically-charged to promote anti-abortion sentiment, current news coverage tries to combat the subjectivity of this language. These terms suggested a fetus’ closeness to “life,” which increased cultural anxiety about abortion (Dubriwny & Siegried, 2021, p.191). News coverage post-*Dobbs*, however, puts these terms in quotation marks to specifically clarify that the terms come from activist groups or an alternate source, and not the authors themselves. This allows them to claim objectivity while still trying to include the necessary and relevant language used by the public. A *Washington Post* article says that the Executive Director of the anti-abortion Florida Family Action, John Stemberger, “expects conservative legislators to file legislation for either a complete ban on abortion or a ‘heartbeat bill’” (Craig, 2022). Putting the politically-charged Heartbeat Bill, which bans abortion at the first sign of a fetal heartbeat (six weeks), in quotation marks makes it clear that the term is not the author’s language, nor is he trying to perpetuate the anti-abortion sentiment that comes along with it.

Moreover, previous research has shown that there was much uncertainty around viability in news coverage (Hollar, 2007, p.11). This remains mostly true in post-*Dobbs* news coverage, where many articles state if abortion is legal pre- or post-viability. However, one *Washington Post* article does include the definition of viability at the bottom of their article, which helps clarify the term: “Fetal viability is generally considered to be around 23 or 24 weeks, but there’s no universal consensus” (Kitchener et al., 2022). By specifically stating the universal uncertainty around viability, the author attempts to ease confusion the readers may feel when engaging with news coverage about abortion. This also counters the previous pattern of unclear terminology, and specifically viability. This may also help clarify laws to the people that the laws are affecting. Overall, the language used when discussing abortion in news coverage builds upon old

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

patterns, challenges the effects of previous themes, and provides a new understanding given a new law that demonstratively shifts culture. However, post-*Dobbs* coverage suggests that news coverage still needs to be more responsible and thoughtful with the language they choose, because it has real effects on society.

Discussion

Although ample post-*Dobbs* news coverage provides insight into the common patterns seen, the connection and presence of these themes altogether communicates far more about America's current cultural understanding of abortion, sex, and death. For instance, framing abortion as a polarized issue allows abortion to be mentioned but less thoroughly discussed. This aligns with previous research, suggesting that framing abortion as a polarized issue will have similar impacts post-*Dobbs* as it did pre-*Dobbs*. These impacts include, but are not limited to, erasing women of color from the narrative and the realities of obtaining an abortion. By framing abortion as a polarized issue, specifically in politics, news coverage gives less time to the people that the *Dobbs* targets the most. It also perpetuates the inaccurate representation of abortion rates, as well as systemic inequalities by failing to address them, as Khalek (2014) first suggested. Due to this, the public may still lack a complete understanding of abortion and the additional parameters recently placed on it.

Although news coverage includes political figures, religious figures, and people from both abortion camps, the overall takeaway is that white men and white women are still the most covered. This effectively frames abortion as a white person's issue, while women of color are the most impacted by *Dobbs* and other reproductive-health-related decisions. Women of color start to appear a bit more frequently in news coverage, but their immense underrepresentation in the two

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

biggest news organizations in America continues to blur abortion statistics and understandings. By focusing far more on the political agenda and polarization surrounding abortion, the public is directly told to focus their attention there, instead of toward potentially life-saving information, such as where they can get an abortion if needed or how it will affect their body. News coverage still fails to prioritize contextual information surrounding abortion and related terms, such as the different exceptions to *Dobbs*. It also fails to account for the systemic inequalities that contribute to unequal abortion rates and access.

With people of color making up the majority of the American prison system, news coverage of *Dobbs* and state-by-state laws is incredibly important. There has been a vast history of incriminating and mistreating pregnant women of color, and with abortion protections removed, these unequal arrests and treatment may only increase. For example, according to NPR, pregnant women of color trying to obtain abortions were targeted through alternate routes such as child abuse and/or drug use claims: “Over a period of five years, a total of 30 women were arrested for child abuse” and every arrest, except for one, was a Black woman (Dirks, 2022). This led to racialized concepts, like the “crack baby” which stereotypically claimed Black mothers were having birth complications due to an alleged use of crack (cheaper form of cocaine). However, there was no data to prove that Black mothers were using drugs any more than their white counterparts, but racism contributed to the unequal and targeted arrests. The criminalization of abortion and failure to adequately discuss these issues in post-*Dobbs* coverage suggests that Black mothers—and other mothers of color—will be even more subject to targeted arrests. In fact, NPR states that there is no way to medically distinguish a self-inflicted abortion from a miscarriage (Dirks, 2022). However, “miscarriages, which occur in 10 to 20 percent of pregnancies, could become heavily scrutinized” post-*Dobbs* (Dirks, 2022). This contributes to

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

the overly simplified issue of exceptions provided with some states' abortion laws, in which the provider and government effectively make all healthcare decisions regarding the pregnant person themselves. Policing these women provides the government with a greater sense of power and control, further perpetuating systems of inequality and unfair healthcare practices.

The more effective and objective use of language is a step in the right direction for news coverage. By placing quotation marks around politically-charged and incorrect terminology, adding in a bit more context to unclear terms (i.e. viability), and providing new essential information about *Dobbs* (i.e. its place in technology), journalists prove to be more objective and responsible in their delivery of information. However, anti-abortion language still exists in government and law, hence why news coverage includes it. The presence of this tactful language further strains the relationship between the government and the public, in which the public may lose more trust in them. Regardless, news coverage seemingly attempts to provide the public with important information about obtaining an abortion post-*Dobbs*.

Discussing issues of technological privacy and the presence of reinstilled state trigger laws demonstrates the immense parameters placed on the public to provide the government with more control. This choice of language also demonstrates the prioritization of the political aspects of abortion, rather than the health-related ones. News coverage then communicates to the public that the political aspects of abortion are more important than the personal ones, which urges them to subscribe to their political agendas (through voting, aligning with a political party, protesting, etc.) and contribute back to their cycle. This study thus demonstrates the importance of the government regaining a sense of trust with the public and taking actions that actually benefit them. There exists a relationship between the public, the government, and the press. This study

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

reveals that those with power or privilege in each of those categories (mostly rich, white men) work together—whether explicitly or implicitly—to maintain that control.

Although this study attempts to be thorough and comprehensive in post-*Dobbs* research, the intense focus on two news organizations perhaps oversimplified the news coverage. In other words, other news organizations may have provided alternative patterns—not seen in *The New York Times* or *Washington Post*—that are essential to the abortion issue. Therefore, future research should explore other major news publications. Even more, the rise of technology and digitized news came a few decades after *Roe*. News coverage in this study also prioritizes technological privacy as a topic. Therefore, research into patterns of talking about abortion through these modern-day digital news platforms would be beneficial. Due to the recency of *Dobbs*, further research should be done into these patterns as well as previous patterns to see if there is any change. Given that this study solely focuses on the week of coverage after *Dobbs*, future research could provide ample insight into the patterns of coverage that have occurred since. The effects of *Dobbs* will be seen far beyond the first week of its passage, and the news' coverage of them will remain vital. Journalists owe it to the public to give the best understanding of their reproductive and legal rights, but they happen to frame abortion in a very uncertain and confusing environment. This, coupled with the unpredictability and fluctuations of state-by-state abortion regulations, suggests that it is doubtful that there will be a sense of clarity any time soon. Therefore, future, if not continual, research is needed.

With something as life-altering and hotly-debated as abortion, this study continues to reveal the salience of abortion as a topic in society. Building upon previous research about patterns in news coverage about abortion, this study shows the significant role the press has on framing and delivering essential information to the public. Through Taguette coding and content

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

analysis of 128 *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles, it is clear that news coverage of abortion is prevalent, controversial, and has effects that further stigmatize abortion and polarize views on it. Although post-*Dobbs* coverage suggests some increase in objectivity and accuracy as well as diversified voices, there is still significant progress to be made to ensure that the public feels well-informed, empowered, and validated. This can look like more personalized stories from women of color, discussing the average costs and consequences of abortion, breaking down the history of systemic inequalities that manifest in abortion statistics, or providing context to complex terms and state-by-state laws. This study works to highlight the importance of ethical journalism and government actions in order to cultivate a more empathetic and thoughtful society. With political officials encouraging the public to vote for their reproductive control, news coverage plays a vital role in delivering information to voters. It is essential that people are equipped with the knowledge to engage in meaningful discourse about Reproductive Justice, abortion, and their health overall.

ABORTION! ABORTION! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

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