

American Media and Deliberative Democratic Processes*

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Despite the importance of mass media to deliberative democratic processes, few scholars have focused on how market forces, occupational norms, and competition among outlets affect the quality of media discourse in mainstream and political outlets. Here, I argue that field theory, as outlined by new institutionalism and Pierre Bourdieu, provides a useful theoretical framework for assessing the quality of media discourse in different kinds of media outlets. The value of field theory is that it simultaneously highlights the importance of homogeneity and heterogeneity within a field of action, which provides a framework for discussing the roles different kinds of outlets play in deliberate democratic processes and evaluating the quality of discourse in mainstream and political venues. I illustrate the utility of this conceptualization through an analysis of 1,424 stories on abortion in nine U.S. media outlets and interviews with journalists, editors, and producers in these venues. I find that political media outlets provide higher-quality discourse than that of mainstream venues. Additionally, I find that while market pressures may heighten a focus on conflict in the abortion debate, this emphasis is exacerbated by mainstream journalists themselves, who assume that the general public is familiar with, and has taken a firm position on, abortion. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for deliberative democratic processes.

Social theorists have long questioned the ability of mass media, as both a societal institution designed to provide information for public consumption and a commercial enterprise, to contribute to deliberative democratic processes (Hardt 2001). In fact, one might say that the verdict is in and the news, indeed, is bad. The push for profit-making (Bagdikian 1997; McChesney 1999), political bullying (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Parenti 1993), and journalistic practices (Gans 1979; Sigelman 1973; Tuchman 1978a) limit what, when, and how issues are relayed to broader publics and, ultimately, circumscribe the ability of media to inform the public about important social and political issues (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson 1992).

There is a rumbling in sociology, however, that perhaps scholars have been overly pessimistic in their assessments of mass media. While the content of media coverage may be limited, the audience can find oppositional readings in media discourse or reject journalistic accounts altogether (Gamson 1992). The growth and accessibility of the Internet has changed how news is relayed to the public and encouraged audiences to respond to and participate in the news around the world (Bohman 2004). Moreover, assessments of media discourse can vary according to the democratic lens through which it is evaluated (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht 2002). What

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this rumbling suggests, in other words, is that assessments of mass media may be overly pessimistic because our theoretical conceptualizations have failed to integrate different strains of media research together in a way that enables us to understand and evaluate the quality of media discourse in a more comprehensive fashion.¹

There are two shortcomings that warrant discussion. First, research often conceptualizes the economic and political pressures that come to bear on mass media, journalistic principles and practices, the normative expectations of mass media in deliberative democratic processes, and media coverage separately (for an exception, see Benson and Neveu 2005a 2005b). As such, scholars use one another's results to inform their arguments but rarely consider how these factors work together to alter the *quality* of media coverage we receive (Ferree et al. 2002). Second, and related, much of the work in the social sciences focuses solely on mainstream (or general audience) media and ignores discourse in political media venues such as the partisan press (except see Rohlinger 2002).² Scholars defend this focus because mainstream news media provide a "master forum" for political contests (Ferree et al. 2002; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). While this may be true, the focus on mainstream outlets alone ignores the important role political outlets play in deliberative democratic processes.

Communication is critical to creating and sustaining democracy because it makes public interaction, discourse, and, ultimately, coordinated action possible (Habermas 1984). In democratic societies, communicative action simultaneously involves promoting consensus among pluralistic groups, which prevents the dissolution of a society, and fostering conflict by enabling groups to formulate and articulate their particularistic positions. Conflict in deliberative processes, particularly, is beneficial to democracy because it brings new ideas and "changes of the will" at the "periphery" to the "center" of society (Habermas 1996), which maximizes the inclusion of different perspectives in public debate (Dahlberg 2005). Even though differences are not always resolved, it provides an opportunity for individuals to transcend their subjectivity and integrate these differences into their understanding of what constitutes a just and democratic society (Young 1997).

Political media outlets, which include independently owned newspapers and magazines, websites, art, poetry, storytelling, and film, are important to deliberative processes because they provide particularistic groups a "free space" to form and articulate their own values, interests, and visions of common good away from more dominant or opposing groups (Fraser 1989; Young 1997).³ In short, mainstream and political outlets have different functions in deliberative democratic processes. Mainstream media outlets operate at the societal level, highlight the differences in values and interests among various groups, and promote discourse that focuses on consensus building among diverse groups. Political media outlets, in contrast, operate at the group level and provide an arena for a group's internal discursive processes, which, in turn, enables particularistic groups to participate in deliberative processes at the societal level effectively (Baker 2002).

¹Ferree et al. (2002) suggest that scholars examine whether mass media possess the characteristics necessary to sustain democratic public life instead of the contribution of mass media to democracy. The latter lacks theoretical and empirical clarity, which makes it difficult to analyze.

²There is a growing body of literature that examines the role of the Internet in democratic discourse and processes. For examples of how scholars have theorized and empirically examined the Internet and democracy, see Ayres (1999), Crossley and Roberts (2004), Dahlberg (2001), Howard (2005), and Siapera (2004).

³This conceptualization is compatible with the subaltern counterpublics described by Fraser (1992: 123), which provide "parallel discursive arenas where... social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."

Here, I argue that field theory, as outlined by new institutionalism and Pierre Bourdieu, provides a useful theoretical framework for assessing the quality of media discourse in mainstream and political outlets. The value of field theory is that it focuses theoretical and empirical attention on the “mezzo level,” which simultaneously highlights how pressures external (such as market forces) and internal (such as occupational values, principles, and norms) to the journalistic field as well as how conflict and competition among media outlets affect coverage of social and political issues (Benson 2006; Benson and Neveu 2005a). Field theory, in other words, highlights the importance of *heterogeneity* within a field of action, which provides a framework for discussing the roles different kinds of outlets play in deliberate democratic processes and evaluating the quality of discourse in mainstream and political venues. I begin by outlining field theory and linking it to discussions of the role of media in deliberative processes. I then illustrate the utility of this conceptualization through an analysis of 1,424 media stories on abortion and interviews with journalists, editors, and producers in nine U.S. media outlets.

THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD AND DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES

In the social sciences, there are two complementary variants of field theory that are particularly relevant for media studies—the organizational fields discussed by new institutionalists, which often implicitly informs research conducted by media scholars, and field theory as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu. The two variants of field theory have several similarities. Both perspectives (1) explain the regularities in individual or organizational action by situating actors within a larger field of action; (2) conceptualize a field as a structured social space that is comprised by a network of relationships among actors with more or less power; (3) argue that fields are relatively coherent because the actors operating in a given field are oriented toward a particular value or prize and agree on the “rules of the game” by which these values are accumulated; and (4) suggest that forces external to the field can affect the “rules of the game” and field output (Benson 2006; Bourdieu 1998b; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Martin 2003). That said, the theoretical and, ultimately, empirical emphases of the perspectives are different.⁴

New institutionalists define an organizational field as “organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:148). Actors operating in a field are guided by an institutional logic, which consists of “a set of material practices and symbolic constructions” (Friedland and Alford 1991:248) that provides the organizing principles and rules of the game (also see Meyer and Rowan 1977). New institutionalists, then, often highlight the processes through which organizations in a field come to resemble one another, or isomorphism (Scott 2001; Zucker 1987). There are three forms of institutional isomorphism: coercive isomorphism, which results from organizations exerting pressure on more dependent organizations; mimetic isomorphism, which is the result of organizations employing similar responses to ambiguity; and normative isomorphism, which is the result of occupational professionalization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). As a result of isomorphism fields are

⁴Here, I highlight what each variant contributes to the analysis of journalism in order to examine the normative expectations of different outlets to deliberative processes. For a detailed discussion on the similarities between new institutionalism and Bourdieu, see Martin (2003) and Benson (2006).

structured, meaning they have clear rules, resources, and relational networks that constrain any one organization's actions and choices. Thus, while organizations are strategic actors and, as such, may alter their goals and/or practices, the rules of the field circumscribe organizational activity, standards, and the ability of any one organization to change (Fligstein 2001; Hensmans 2003; Rao, Morrill, and Zald 2000).

New institutionalism, although often implicitly, informs scholarly examinations of journalism as both an occupation and a commercial enterprise.⁵ For example, scholars have examined how journalistic professionalization, news production processes, market pressures, and the state shape news coverage. In the United States, mainstream journalists uphold the doctrine of objectivity and employ practices designed to inform the masses through fact-driven and politically neutral reporting (Schudson 2003; Sigelman 1973; Tuchman 1972).⁶ However, journalistic practices also are influenced by pressures external to the "journalistic field"—mainly economics (e.g., market imperatives to generate profits) and the state (e.g., issues of national security) (Benson and Saguy 2005; Herman and Chomsky 1988; McManus 1994). Journalists, who consistently deal with scarce resources, tight deadlines, and limited space for the news, use "news nets" to "catch" the big stories (Tuchman 1978b), rely heavily on "insider" sources (such as politicians, government officials, and bureaucrats), and look to prominent media outlets (such as *The New York Times*) to provide the news of the day (Gans 1979; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Tuchman 1987).⁷ Together, these various pressures create a consensus regarding the day's news and, as such, have a homogenizing affect on media coverage (Gamson et al. 1992; Gitlin 1980). New institutionalism as it relates to sociological studies of journalism, in other words, highlights how both forces external (the state and the market) and internal (occupational professionalization) to the journalistic field systematically narrow and homogenize the media coverage.

However, some scholars have suggested that while new institutionalism brings empirical focus to the importance of individual outlets operating within and state pressures upon the journalistic field, the perspective does not go far enough and would benefit from incorporating Pierre Bourdieu's work into their analyses (Benson 2006; Benson and Neveu 2005b). One important benefit of integrating the work of Bourdieu into new institutionalism is the theoretical focus on heterogeneity within the field and how differences among outlets operating in the journalistic field affects media coverage (Benson and Neveu 2005a; Bourdieu 1993, 1998a).⁸ The focus on heterogeneity within the journalistic field is particularly important for considering the role of mass media in deliberative democratic processes. First, the focus on

⁵The new institutionalist framework is generally implied, rather than explicitly outlined (except see Cook 1998), in the sociology of news (recent examples include Bagdikian 1997; de Bruin 2000; Clayman and Reisner 1998; Hollifield, Kosicki, and Becker 2001; McQuail 2000; Sparrow 1999).

⁶This, of course, was not always the case. Initially, the press was partisan in nature. In fact, objectivity did not become a central occupational principle until the 1920s. In 1923, newspaper editors formed a professional association and officially adopted the "Cannons of Journalism," which was a code of journalistic ethics that included sincerity, truth, accuracy, and impartiality. However, even as journalists articulated objectivity as a guiding principle, some recognized its limits and instead engaged in "interpretive" journalism in which they reported and explained the news of the day (Schudson 2003).

⁷Some scholars argue that the reliance on institutional sources for news makes journalists vulnerable to co-optation. For example, journalists who do not accept the interpretations of social and political events provided by the White House may find that they no longer have access to governmental officials. Thus, journalists are more likely to accept the news provided by high-level sources without question in order to protect their careers (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Parenti 1993).

⁸Some new institutionalists do discuss heterogeneity in fields. For example, Rao et al. (2000:260) note that fields are differentially structured. In hierarchally structured fields, for instance, there are a few actors dominating the field while several others "survive on the bottom."

heterogeneity within a field illuminates the differential pressures that come to bear on mainstream and political outlets as well as how these pressures affect the quality of media discourse. Second, mainstream and political outlets have different roles in deliberative processes, and, as such, each kind of outlet has its own set of normative criteria it must meet. The focus on differentiation within the journalistic field, then, lends insight into how journalists in mainstream and political outlets relationally define themselves and their actions and how these differences affect the quality of media coverage and, in turn, deliberative democratic processes.

Differences among actors in a field are the result relational dynamics and power. Bourdieu argues that the social world is structured around two opposing forms of power, or economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1998a, 1998b, 2005). While the forms of economic and cultural capital vary from field to field, economic capital is represented by circulation/ratings and advertising dollars and cultural capital by professional honors that result from peer recognition such as the Pulitzer Prize in the journalistic field (Benson 2006; Bourdieu 1998a).⁹ The field itself is structured around two poles: the “heteronomous pole,” which represents forces that are external to the field (in this case, the market), and the “autonomous pole,” which represents the specific form of capital valued within the field (in this case, intellectual reporting). Because a field is a structured space between these two poles, an actor’s location within a field indicates the kinds of internal and external pressures that come to bear on an actor as well as the amount of cultural capital it wields (Bourdieu 1998a). Commercial media outlets are located near the heteronomous pole, meaning they are disproportionately influenced by economic considerations, while “serious” (or political) media are situated near the autonomous pole. Outlets, at either extreme or located anywhere in between, strive to build legitimacy in the field through the accumulation of economic or cultural capital. At the same time, outlets espouse the superiority of their particular form of capital relative to the other.¹⁰ This, Benson (2006:190) argues, “helps account for the ongoing tension between culturally rich, but often economically starved, alternative or literary journalism (*The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, etc.), and culturally poor but economically rich market journalism (commercial television news).”

In other words, the complementary variants of field theory offered by new institutionalism and Bourdieu highlight the importance of both homogeneity and heterogeneity within the journalistic field. On the one hand, journalists share an occupation, the principles and norms that accompany that occupation, and the broad goal of informing and educating audiences. On the other hand, there is heterogeneity in the journalistic field. Mainstream and political outlets go about informing and educating audiences in very different ways. Mainstream journalists employ practices that are designed to simultaneously uphold the doctrine of objectivity and contend with market pressures to increase profits. Political journalists, in contrast, are more oriented to the autonomous “intellectual” pole and, as such, have very different conceptualizations of their role in the media industry as well as a different set of journalistic practices when deciding what news to cover and how to cover it. In short, it is not simply

⁹Bourdieu (1998a:53–54) argues that while the conflict over “market” and “pure” exists in every field, the journalistic field is more dependent on (effected by) market forces than other fields of cultural production. The problem with this is that the journalistic field wields a great deal of power over all other fields, meaning coverage in the journalistic field can affect other fields such as politics.

¹⁰The accumulation of economic and cultural capital is not mutually exclusive. In fact, Benson (2006) argues that outlets that accumulate both kinds of capital (such as *The New York Times*) can alter the rules of the field in substantial ways.

that the discourse of political outlets is different than that of mainstream venues but that journalists working in political outlets employ different principles and practices to achieve a collective goal. Field theory, then, is not only useful for examining the dynamics of the field (Champagne 2005; Duval 2005; Marchetti 2005) and cross-national comparisons (Benson 2005; Benson and Saguy 2005), but also the quality of mass media discourse in different outlets as well as how external (economic) and internal (professional norms) pressures affect the ability of journalists to produce high-quality discourse on social and political issues. This is an important next step that is rarely made. In this article, I connect conceptualizations of the journalistic field with the discursive democratic tradition. Specifically, I evaluate the quality of discourse in mainstream and political venues and analyze the external and internal forces that shape reporting on abortion.

ASSESSING MEDIA DISCOURSE: DATA AND METHODS

The role of mass media in democratic societies is contested terrain (Hardt 2001). Democratic theorists disagree on the characteristics associated with democratic societies and the normative criteria of democratic discourse.¹¹ As such, rather than provide an exhaustive list of criteria that might be associated with different democratic traditions, I examine three criteria—inclusivity, civility, and dialogue—associated with Habermas’s discursive tradition (see Ferree et al. 2002: ch. 10 for a discussion). Here, I analyze media content in nine outlets that are different in form and function (print and electronic, and mainstream and political), are relatively prominent, and have been in existence for at least 20 years (see Table 1).¹² Because I am broadly interested in the quality of discourse in different kinds of outlets (mainstream and political), I discuss three types of media outlets: mainstream (which includes *The New York Times*, *Time*, and the nightly national broadcasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC), liberal/left (*The Nation* and *Ms.*), and conservative (*National Review* and *Human Events: The National Conservative Weekly*).¹³ For the purposes of this study, I analyzed stories on the abortion issue. Abortion is a useful case for two reasons. First, it is a controversial issue and, therefore, the quality of media discourse is easy to assess. Second, unlike other controversial political issues, such as the environment, there is no corporate stake in the abortion issue and, as such, it garners regular media attention (Croteau and Hoynes 1994).¹⁴

For sampling purposes, I coded media stories during critical discourse moments of the abortion debate. Critical discourse moments are times when an issue is salient to a broad audience and, therefore, likely to garner media attention (Gamson 1992; Rohlinger 2002). This strategy makes sense when examining media coverage on the abortion issue because on most days abortion is not news. The focus on critical discourse moments, then, captures those peak times when abortion is actually on

¹¹For an overview of the differences between democratic traditions, see (Baker (2002), Ferree et al. (2002), and Young (1997).

¹²A field may be in flux in terms of the number and types of outlets in existence at a given time. Here, I examine outlets that have achieved some degree of success, which is reflected in their survival over time. This excluded “new media” from the analysis. I leave it to other scholars to analyze Internet news sites and talk radio broadcasts.

¹³Results are discussed separately for each outlet elsewhere (Rohlinger 2004).

¹⁴The economic interests of corporations can additionally complicate the analysis of market pressures on the quality of media discourse of social and political issues. For example, NBC, which is owned by General Electric, may be instructed not to report on GE’s record of gross pollution.

Table 1. Media Outlet Information

Outlet	Viewership/ Circulation	Produced	Year Established
Print			
<i>The New York Times</i>	1,251,806	Daily	1851
<i>Time Magazine</i>	4,219,101	Weekly	1923
<i>National Review</i>	147,679	Weekly	1955
<i>The Nation</i>	81,253	Weekly	1865
<i>Human Events</i>	53,333	Weekly	1944
<i>Ms. Magazine</i>	376,150	Monthly	1972
Electronic			
World News Tonight with Peter Jennings	9,590,000	Daily	1943
CBS Evening News	7,720,000	Daily	1931
NBC Nightly News	10,070,000	Daily	1930

Note: Self-reported circulation rates were compiled from the Standard Periodical Directory and Magazines for Libraries. The averages are based on circulation rates for 1986, 1995, and 2000. The dates for NBC and CBS reflect the first transmission, respectively. The date for ABC reflects the inception of the station, which was previously owned by NBC Blue.

the media agenda (see Meyer and Staggenborg 1998). I coded media stories during 35 critical discourse moments occurring between 1980 and 2000 and including three Supreme Court decisions, four legislative debates/votes, three presidential elections, three executive nominations, and three social movement events, which included the bombing of an abortion clinic in 1985, the murder of Dr. Gunn in 1993, and the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* for each of the years.¹⁵ This yielded a sample of 1,424 media stories (a list and description of the critical discourse moments is available in the Appendix).

First, media discourse should be *inclusive* and give a voice to differing perspectives and groups (Ferree et al. 2002). In mainstream media this means providing a common space where different interests and group perspectives regarding abortion may be discussed. Political media, in contrast, must prioritize the cultivation and formulation of particular group values and, as such, discourse does not need to be inclusive of perspectives outside of the group. To assess the inclusivity of discourse, I coded for the presence of several different kinds of institutional and social movements actors in coverage.¹⁶ The categories of institutional actors are: the President and White House spokesperson (also includes the Vice President); elected

¹⁵I chose critical discourse moments that were (1) identified as important by scholars and activists and (2) represented wins and losses for both sides over time. Using Lexus-Nexus, indexes, abstracts, and manual inspection, I coded *all* media stories discussing the abortion issue during specified time frames. Although I do not present the results here, for each story I noted whether or not the critical discourse moment under investigation was discussed in the coverage. For anticipated events (such as legislative votes, presidential elections, executive nominations, and the *Roe v. Wade* anniversary), I coded media stories about abortion occurring before and after the event. For unanticipated events (such as clinic violence and the murder of Dr. Gunn), I coded media stories about abortion the date of and after the event. A detailed account of the sampling time frames for each critical discourse moment for each of the outlets is available by request.

¹⁶Although I coded for the presence of a much broader range of institutional actors, I present condensed categories here. For example, President, Vice President, and White House spokespeople were coded separately. Because the Vice President and White House spokespeople received very few mentions, these categories were combined.

officials; bureaucrats and civil servants (which includes other nominated officials such as judges, Supreme Court justices, governmental offices other than the Executive or Congress such as the Attorney General or FBI, and the police/fire department); candidates (for President and Vice President); executive nominees; scientists, doctors, and academics; and think tanks and policy organizations. In order to categorize social movement actors, I noted the names of all of the pro-choice and pro-life actors and organizations mentioned in the media coverage. I then looked up the goals and tactics of each organization and placed the actor/group into one of the following pro-choice or pro-life categories: direct action groups; political groups; service groups; religious groups, unaffiliated activists (meaning the activist's group membership was not provided); and extremists (individuals or groups that engage in violence).

Inclusivity is also examined through an analysis of the frames and packages included in the media coverage. Frames are central organizing ideas that tell an audience what is at issue and outline the boundaries of the debate. Political leaders, social movement groups, and individuals present frames as a way of defining a situation as problematic, identifying the responsible party or structure, articulating a reasonable solution, and calling individuals to action (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1992; Snow and Benford 1992). For example, pro-choice groups often define the abortion debate in terms of rights and specifically argue that women have a right to obtain an abortion. Pro-life groups, in contrast, generally focus on the rights of the unborn child and argue that unborn babies should have the same civil liberties as other individuals. Packages are a set of ideas that are related to a frame and are used to structure and negotiate an issue's meaning over time. Packages, in other words, represent an explicit attempt to link frames to a changing political environment (Rohlinger 2002). For instance, pro-choice groups respond to pro-life claims that unborn children have protected rights by arguing that such a framework is unacceptable because it prioritizes the rights of a fetus over the health and well-being of women. Pro-life groups, in turn, argue that they are not trying to prioritize the woman or the fetus in the debate but are simply trying to protect them both from harm. In short, individuals and groups generate packages in order to buttress their frames and to negotiate the meaning of their frames over time and in response to counterarguments and political change.

In order to examine the inclusivity of media discourse, I began by analyzing four social movement organizations with differing perspectives on the abortion debate: Planned Parenthood Federation of America (a pro-choice health organization), the National Organization for Women (a pro-choice feminist organization), the National Right to Life Committee (a secular pro-life organization), and Concerned Women for America (a Judeo-Christian pro-life organization). I read all the newsletters for each of these groups from 1980 to 2000 and constructed a list of 136 frames and packages used during this time frame.¹⁷ I then coded for the presence/absence of all the frames and packages in the media stories. An "other" category was also included

¹⁷When reading the newsletters, I constructed a list of themes (frames) and specific arguments that supported these broad themes (packages) and kept a running tally of number of times each was mentioned in a given year. After I had completed this for each of the years, I went back and condensed the themes and packages where possible. For example, both pro-life and pro-choice groups detail the activities and tactics of their opponents. Instead of noting each activity (such as marches, petitions, boycotts) and tactic (the use of propaganda, media campaigns, and lobbying efforts), I constructed a package titled "activities of the opposing movement" to incorporate the range of attacks opponents launched on unborn children's rights and women's rights, respectively.

in the coding scheme. Here, I discuss the most prominent frames and packages in the sample.¹⁸ If mainstream media discourse on abortion is inclusive, a range of frames and packages will be included and media discourse will highlight points of agreement among the groups.¹⁹ Political outlets, on the other hand, will include differing perspectives and ideas among individuals in the same group.

Discourse also should emphasize *civility*, or mutual respect (Ferree et al. 2002). In mainstream media civility is important for continued dialogue among groups with opposing points of view and “the thinking and policies of the overriding democratic government” (Baker 2002:153). The formulation of public good and deliberate action to this end necessitates an open dialogue among pluralist groups. In political media, civility among diverse perspectives within a group is necessary for the continued cultivation of group values and interests. I analyze the *civility* of media discourse by examining the rhetorical style used by the journalist or anchor in the story.²⁰ Rhetorical style refers to the language used by the journalist or anchor rather than the quotes or sentiments of the sources featured in the story. While opponents may not always be civil to one another, journalists in both mainstream and political outlets should generally promote agreement among diverse groups. As such, journalists should not take sides in these debates. Here, I coded the rhetorical styles of *journalists* used to describe the arguments, activities, and/or advocates of the pro-choice and pro-life positions.

There are four, mutually exclusive rhetorical styles: vilification, partisan, valorization, and neutral. Vilification equates pro-life or pro-choice advocates as morally or ethically wrong and/or denigrates the arguments and the cause. A partisan style subtly undermines a cause or its position through the use of labels such as “conservative,” “extreme,” and “radical.” Of course, it is possible that journalists may valorize particular positions and/or activities. This rhetorical style uses loaded language that is culturally resonant (such as “rights”) to support a particular position on an issue and equates advocate activities and/or arguments as normative or correct. It is likely that these rhetorical styles will be the most prominent in political outlets as journalists articulate a particular vision of public good that is very much in contrast with other group ideologies. A neutral style adopts the preferred language of advocates to describe activities, arguments, and goals.²¹ It is expected that mainstream media journalists will often use the preferred terminology of advocates in an effort to remain politically neutral on a controversial issue.

Finally, media discourse should promote *dialogue* among individuals and groups with different values and interests. Ferree et al. (2002:240) note that “a dialogic process is one in which the participants provide fully developed arguments for their own positions and take seriously and respond to the arguments of others.” Discourse in

¹⁸Analysis revealed that a relatively stable set of ideas are included in abortion discourse over time. Therefore, I discuss the sample in its entirety and do not provide an analysis over time by each outlet and event.

¹⁹It is here that the having an “other” category is particularly important. We would not expect social movement groups to highlight points of agreement or discuss potential compromises with their opponents (although, as I discuss later, these areas of consensus do exist). However, third parties or journalists themselves may point to these areas of agreement and compromise.

²⁰In their study, Ferree et al. (2002) operationalized civility by analyzing “hot button” language that was likely to outrage opponents. However, as Baker (2002) notes, sometimes groups must use strong language in order to formulate their values, interests, and vision of public good. Polarized language, then, is likely to be used in coverage.

²¹As Baker (2002) and Fraser (1992) point out, self-definition and group language is important for distinguishing a group’s position from others in society and does not preclude civil discourse and action on political issues.

mainstream media, then, should promote discussions among individuals and groups with different values and interests, while political outlets should promote dialogue among individuals with diverse points of view within a group. Here, I draw on Ferree et al.'s (2002) definition of dialogic structure, which looks for the presence of opposing speakers and ideas in the same story. As Ferree and her colleagues note, this does not provide insight into the extent to which groups engage one another or address the values and ideas of other groups, but is a measure of the "opportunity for dialogue."

As the discussion of field theory above highlights, in order to evaluate the quality of discourse provided by mass media outlets, we must recognize that journalists are embedded in a broader field of action that is affected by external (economic pressures) and internal (occupational ideals and norms) pressures. While the journalistic field coheres because actors share broad goals, there is heterogeneity within the field as outlets strive to distinguish themselves from others and build legitimacy in the field. To understand how these forces affect the quality of abortion discourse, I conducted a total of 15 semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, and producers working in each of the outlets. I asked respondents a variety of questions, including those about their occupational practices and norms, when abortion was deemed a newsworthy issue, how story angles and sources were chosen, how newsworthiness and abortion stories have changed over time, how they managed the tension between producing quality coverage and the organizational focus on profits, and the role of their outlet in democratic discourse. I interviewed a former editor-in-chief and two former managing editors from *Time*, a senior producer for NBC Nightly News, an executive producer and his executive assistant for ABC's World News Tonight, three journalists and one editor at *The New York Times*, a journalist for *National Review*, a journalist for *Human Events*, a senior editor from *Ms.*, and a journalist and a editorial director at *The Nation*.²² All the interviews were conducted over the phone, except the one with the ABC executive producer, and ran from 10 minutes to two and one-half hours. The identities of all respondents are confidential.

THE QUALITY OF DISCOURSE IN MAINSTREAM AND POLITICAL OUTLETS

Table 2 shows the percentage of stories in which institutional and movement actors were mentioned. The actors are rank ordered from highest to lowest percentage of mentions in mainstream outlets. It is clear in Table 2 that mainstream media are fairly inclusive in terms of the kinds of actors mentioned in abortion stories.²³ A range of institutional actors are mentioned in coverage, including the elected officials (31.2 percent) and bureaucrats (29.5 percent), who often make policy, and academics, lawyers, and medical professionals with the expertise to explain the implications of policies and events (20.1 percent). Social movement actors also receive a good deal of attention in mainstream coverage. The most mentioned/quoted social movement actors—pro-choice political groups—are included in 30 percent of the stories on abortion, a percentage that rivals that of institutional actors. Moreover, when the

²²The respondents for the outlets were generally chosen on the basis of their tenure at the outlet, their experience in writing on the abortion issue, and their willingness to speak with me.

²³This is consistent with the results found in Ferree et al. (2002). Thus, differences in the kinds of actors included in coverage may be in part a function of the issues scholars choose to study and/or the methods they employ.

Table 2. Most Mentioned Institutional and Movement Actors in Mainstream, Conservative, and Liberal/left Outlets

Actor	Outlet		
	Mainstream	Conservative	Liberal/ Left
Institutional actors			
President and White House spokespeople	31.6%	33.7%	26.0%
Elected officials	31.2%	53.6%	22.0%
Bureaucrats and civil servants	29.5%	24.3%	28.9%
Scientists, doctors, and academics	20.1%	12.7%	28.9%
Presidential candidates and nominees	11.7%	12.2%	5.2%
Journalists	3.8%	11.0%	12.7%
Think tanks	3.7%	1.7%	8.1%
Social movement actors			
Pro-choice political groups	30.0%	21.0%	32.9%
Pro-life political groups	13.9%	18.2%	10.4%
Pro-life religious groups	13.7%	9.4%	11.0%
Pro-life direct action groups	11.7%	3.3%	6.4%
Pro-choice service groups	10.9%	3.3%	18.5%
Pro-life activists (unaffiliated)	6.0%	2.2%	5.8%
Pro-life extremists	5.6%	0.5%	6.4%
Pro-choice activists (unaffiliated)	2.5%	1.1%	1.2%
Pro-choice religious groups	1.9%	0.0%	8.1%
Pro-choice direct action groups	1.1%	0.0%	1.2%

various pro-life and pro-choice groups are consolidated into pro-choice and pro-life blocs, movement actors are mentioned or discussed in more than 40 percent of the stories, which is more than any institutional actor.

That said, some kinds of movement groups are included in coverage more often than others. For example, pro-life political groups (organizations that challenge abortion laws through institutional venues) and direct action groups (organizations that use noninstitutional tactics such as picketing and “rescues” at abortion clinics) are included in media coverage more often than pro-life groups that provide services (pregnancy homes, adoption services, and financial support) to pregnant women. This finding is consistent with previous research, which notes that journalistic definitions of what constitutes “newsworthy” events, the pressure to grab audience attention and increase outlet profits, and the conventional structure of news stories emphasize conflict surrounding social and political issues (Bagdikian 1997; Croteau and Hoynes 1994; Gamson 1990; Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991).

Like mainstream media, discourse in conservative and liberal/left media outlets is also fairly inclusive of institutional and social movement actors. However, there are three distinct trends in political outlets that differentiate conservative and liberal/left outlets from mainstream venues and one another. First, coverage in political outlets includes movement actors with whom they are sympathetic more often than mainstream coverage. For example, conservative venues include pro-life political groups (18.2 percent) in media stories more often than either mainstream (13.9 percent) or liberal/left (10.4 percent) outlets. Similarly, liberal/left outlets include pro-choice

political groups (32.9 percent) in media stories more often than conservative (21.0 percent) or mainstream (30.0 percent) outlets. Second, political outlets mention and/or quote other journalists in coverage more often than mainstream media venues. While journalists are included in only 3.8 percent of mainstream media coverage, they are mentioned or quoted in 11.0 percent of conservative and 12.7 percent of liberal/left abortion stories. As I discuss later, this is a function of how political journalists conceptualize their role in democratic societies relative to mainstream venues. Finally, conservative and liberal/left outlets place different emphases on institutional and movement actors. Conservative outlets refer to institutional actors more often in abortion stories than either mainstream or liberal/left outlets. Elected officials, for example, are mentioned or quoted in 53.6 percent of conservative media stories and only 31.2 percent of mainstream and 22.0 percent of liberal/left media coverage. In contrast, liberal/left outlets include social movement groups in coverage more often than institutional actors. For instance, while pro-choice religious groups are not mentioned at all in conservative coverage and are rarely mentioned in mainstream stories (1.9 percent), they are included in 8.1 percent of liberal/left coverage of the abortion issue.

Another indicator of inclusivity is the kinds and range of frames and packages included in media discourse. Table 3 lists the most mentioned pro-choice and pro-life frames mentioned in mainstream and political coverage.²⁴ Of the 32 pro-life and pro-choice frames originally identified when coding the social movement organization newsletters, only these 14 frames were included in coverage consistently. Moreover, the arguments that are most often included in the coverage are not always those frames that are most central to the abortion debate.²⁵ In Table 3, we can see that pro-choice and pro-life frames are covered differently. While the main pro-choice frame that women have a right to an abortion is included in 30.5 percent of mainstream stories, the frames central to the pro-life movement (the arguments that unborn children have a right to life and that abortion is immoral) are included in less than 10 percent of the coverage.²⁶ Additionally, the frames that are most often included in mainstream coverage are those that highlight conflict between pro-life and pro-choice forces. The most mentioned pro-life frame in mainstream outlets is “advancing the pro-life cause” (14.8 percent, as seen in Table 3), which outlines support for the pro-life movement and the various fronts where the war on legalized abortion is being waged. There is a similar trend in pro-choice frames. In fact, the “threats to abortion rights” frame (included in 23.5 percent of mainstream stories) and “advancing abortion rights” (included in 17.9 percent of mainstream stories) are among the most mentioned frames.

The emphasis on conflict between pro-choice and pro-life supporters is also clear in the kinds of packages, or the supporting ideas that negotiate a frame’s meaning over time, included in mainstream discourse (Table 4). Specifically, the packages that outline the activities and tactics of opponents (“activities of the antiabortion movement” 12.3 percent, “government action that undercuts abortion rights” 10.8 percent, and “activities of the pro-life movement” 6.9 percent) and identify the elites

²⁴Like Table 2, both Tables 3 and 4 lists the most mentioned frames and packages according to their rank in mainstream media venues.

²⁵For additional discussion on the stalwart arguments of pro-life and pro-choice advocates, see Condit (1990), Maxwell (2002), Merton (1982), Rohlinger (2006).

²⁶This may also be a result of the established institutional discourse on abortion, which highlights women’s rights rather than issues of morality (see Ferree 2003 for a discussion regarding how resonance is embedded in institutional discourse).

Table 3. Percentage of Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Frames Included in Mainstream, Conservative, and Liberal/Left Coverage

	Outlet		
	Mainstream	Conservative	Liberal/ Left
Pro-choice frames			
Women have a right to an abortion	30.5%	18.2%	40.5%
Threats to abortion rights	23.5%	5.0%	41.0%
Advancing abortion rights	17.9%	3.3%	30.1%
The effects of abortion restriction on society	7.0%	0.6%	15.6%
Benefits of legal abortion to society	6.4%	3.3%	9.8%
The scientific facts about abortion	4.2%	2.2%	4.6%
Critique of the anti-abortion movement	2.7%	1.1%	4.0%
Pro-life frames			
Advancing the pro-life cause	14.8%	26.5%	0.6%
The truth about abortion	14.4%	32.0%	13.9%
Unborn children have a right to life	8.2%	18.2%	9.8%
Threats to the pro-life cause	6.9%	30.9%	1.9%
Abortion is immoral	6.5%	12.7%	2.9%
Divisions in the pro-life movement	2.8%	1.7%	2.3%
The new civil rights movement	2.7%	5.5%	0.0%

allied with each perspective (“allies of abortion rights” 8.6 percent and “allies of the pro-life cause” 5.3 percent) garner the most mentions and discussion in mainstream coverage. This is not to suggest that mainstream media coverage ignores the interplay of ideas among the opposing points of view, only that the inclusion of movement frames and packages highlights differences and disagreements between the two sides.

Political outlets, not surprisingly, cover frames and packages that resonate with their ideological point of view at higher rates. For example, the pro-choice frames “women have a right to an abortion,” “threats to abortion rights,” and “advancing abortion rights” are included in more than 30 percent of the stories in liberal outlets (Table 3). Similarly, the pro-life frames “the truth about abortion,” “threats to the pro-life cause,” and “advancing the pro-life cause” are included in more than 25 percent of the stories in conservative outlets (Table 3). Political outlets also cover the positions with which they are most sympathetic in more comprehensive ways. This is clear from a simple glance Table 4, which shows the percentages of pro-choice and pro-life packages included in each type of outlet. For example, conservative outlets discuss the packages associated with the “truth about abortion” frame more often than mainstream venues. Specifically, conservative coverage not only notes that “abortion kills a child” (29.3 percent), but also includes arguments regarding why women really obtain abortions (3.3 percent), that abortion is a modern-day Holocaust (4.4 percent), outlines the health risks associated with the abortion procedure (2.8 percent), and discusses the alternatives to abortion (3.3 percent). Similarly, liberal/left outlets discuss their enemies (“allies of the antiabortion movement” 6.9 percent), specific government action to secure abortion rights (6.9 percent), and the implications

Table 4. Percentage of Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Packages Included in Mainstream, Conservative, and Liberal/Left Coverage

	Outlet		
	Mainstream	Conservative	Liberal/Left
Pro-choice packages			
<i>Threats to abortion rights frame</i>			
Activities of the anti-abortion movement	12.3%	2.8%	27.2%
Government action that undercuts abortion rights	10.8%	1.7%	15.0%
Allies of the anti-abortion movement	3.5%	.6%	6.9%
<i>Advancing abortion rights frame</i>			
Allies of abortion rights	8.6%	2.8%	11.6%
Activities of the pro-choice movement	5.5%	1.7%	12.7%
Government action that advances abortion rights	3.9%	0.0%	6.9%
<i>The effects of abortion restriction on society</i>			
Perpetuating inequality	7.9%	.6%	13.3%
Pro-life packages			
<i>Advancing the pro-life cause</i>			
Activities of the pro-life movement	6.9%	8.8%	.6%
Allies of the pro-life cause	5.3%	11.0%	0.0%
Government action that advances the pro-life cause	4.6%	9.9%	0.0%
<i>The truth about abortion</i>			
Abortion kills an unborn child	12.9%	29.3%	11.6%
The health risks of abortion	1.5%	2.8%	.6%
Abortion is a Holocaust	1.0%	4.4%	4.0%
Why women really have abortions	.7%	3.3%	.6%
<i>Unborn children have a right to life</i>			
Options to the abortion procedure	.7%	3.3%	2.3%

of abortion restrictions to women’s rights (“perpetuating inequality” 13.9 percent) more often the mainstream venues. That said, political outlets do not completely ignore opposing points of view and address the foundational arguments of their opponents (Table 3). Conservative outlets mention and discuss the pro-choice claim that “women have a right to an abortion” (18.2 percent) and liberal/left outlets address the pro-life claims regarding “the truth about abortion” (13.3 percent).

The civility of media discourse also varies among mainstream and political outlets (Table 5). I measured civility by examining the rhetorical style used by journalists in abortion stories. Mainstream media journalists predominantly use a neutral tone in coverage of the abortion issue. In fact, 59 percent of the stories that discuss the pro-life cause or groups and 96.5 percent of the stories that discuss the pro-choice cause or groups use a neutral rhetorical style. That said, pro-life advocates and their issues/activities are described negatively much more often than are their pro-choice counterparts. Journalists vilify pro-life activities and organizations in 10.1 percent of the media stories and use a partisan rhetorical style in more than 30 percent of

Table 5. Rhetorical Styles Used by Journalists in Mainstream, Conservative, and Liberal/Left Outlets

Rhetorical Style	Pro-Life		Pro-Choice	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
<i>Mainstream</i>				
Vilification	10.1	108	.6	6
Partisan	30.8	330	1.2	13
Valorization	.1	1	1.7	18
Neutral	59.0	631	96.5	1033
Total	100.0	1070	100.0	1070
<i>Conservative</i>				
Vilification	0.0	0	3.9	7
Partisan	3.9	7	27.1	49
Valorization	9.9	18	.6	1
Neutral	86.2	156	68.5	124
Total	100.0	181	100.0	181
<i>Liberal/Left</i>				
Vilification	16.8	29	0.0	0
Partisan	39.3	68	.6	1
Valorization	0.0	0	1.7	3
Neutral	43.9	76	97.7	169
Total	100.0	173	100.0	173

the coverage. However, a closer analysis reveals that vilification is associated with a particular kind of pro-life activity. In more than 75 percent of the cases in which this style is used, the media story is about or refers to violence against clinics and clinic personnel, a tactic that has been used by the radical flank of the pro-life movement to end abortion in the United States.²⁷ This, of course, does not diminish the use of partisan language as it relates to the pro-life movement, which will be further discussed in the next section.

Discourse in political outlets is relatively civil. Conservative outlets use a neutral rhetorical style in reference to the pro-life movement and its activities in 86.2 percent of the media stories and in 68.5 percent of the media coverage that discusses the pro-choice movement. Similarly, liberal/left journalists use a neutral style in 97.7 percent of the stories discussing the pro-choice movement and in 43.9 percent of the stories discussing the pro-life movement. While the appearance of a neutral rhetorical style in the case of ideological opponents is somewhat surprising, political journalists do use partisan language to describe and vilify their opponents. What is more surprising is the relative absence of valorization in reference to ideologically aligned social movements. While this style is used more often in conservative journalists' discussions of the pro-life movement (9.9 percent) than liberal/left journalists' descriptions of pro-choice activities (1.7 percent), political journalists obviously draw on the preferred language of each movement without treating movement perspectives as normative. In this regard, then, political outlets are more like mainstream venues.

²⁷These analyses are not shown, but are available upon request.

Table 6. Opportunity for Dialogue in Media Discourse

Structure	Outlet		
	Mainstream	Conservative	Liberal/Left
<i>Organizations</i>			
Neither	48.7%	61.3%	48.0%
Pro-life only	20.7%	21.5%	14.5%
Pro-choice only	12.1%	11.0%	23.7%
Both	18.6%	6.1%	13.9%
<i>Ideas</i>			
Neither	30.0%	22.7%	16.8%
Pro-life only	13.5%	49.7%	2.3%
Pro-choice only	33.4%	5.5%	59.0%
Both	23.2%	22.1%	22.0%
<i>Both pro-life and pro-choice organizations and ideas</i>	7.5%	1.1%	3.8%

Note: The number reflects the percentage of stories that mention a pro-life or pro-choice organization, pro-life and pro-choice ideas, or both in media coverage.

Finally, Table 6 illustrates the opportunity for dialogue among opponents in mainstream and political outlets. Specifically, the table shows the frequency of articles in which neither pro-life or pro-choice advocates or their frames/packages were mentioned or discussed, only pro-life groups and their frames/packages were discussed, only pro-choice and their frames/packages were discussed, both pro-life and pro-choice groups or their frames/packages were discussed, and both pro-life and pro-choice groups and their frames/packages were discussed. Mainstream media discourse provides little opportunity for dialogue among groups. In fact, groups from both sides of the abortion issue are included in only 18.6 percent of the media stories. The opportunity for dialogue improves slightly (23.2 percent) when looking at the percentage of articles that include both pro-life and pro-choice frames/packages. However, only 7.5 percent of the mainstream media stories include organizations and ideas from both sides of the abortion issue, indicating that the opportunity for dialogue among opposing groups over their ideas of public good is very low indeed. The opportunity for dialogue among pro-life and pro-choice groups in political outlets is predictably very low (1.1 percent in conservative outlets and 3.8 percent in liberal/left outlets). Consistent with the findings on inclusivity and civility, political outlets include the groups and ideas with which they are the most sympathetic more often.

In sum, we see distinct differences in mainstream and political media outlet discourse on the abortion issue. Mainstream media outlets are fairly inclusive and discuss a range of institutional and social movement organizations and frames and packages in abortion stories. That said, the kinds of social movement groups and claims about abortion included in coverage highlight the conflict between pro-life and pro-choice advocates. Given the mainstream emphasis on conflict, it is not surprising that even though journalists are civil there is a relatively small opportunity for discourse among diverse perspectives. Political outlets, in contrast, are generally more inclusive of social movement groups and discuss a broader range of frames and packages in coverage—although only of the movements with which they are

sympathetic. Additionally, journalists in political outlets are largely civil when discussing the abortion issue and allow for more dialogue among like-minded groups.

THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD AND THE QUALITY OF DISCOURSE

In order to better understand the quality of media discourse on abortion, we must embed these findings in a broader field of action—one that is externally affected by market pressures and internally shaped by both a shared occupational goal and differences in terms of how journalists achieve this goal. Here, I draw on interview data with 15 journalists, editors, and producers to examine how market pressures and journalistic values, norms, and practices affect the quality of discourse in mainstream and political media outlets. In the conclusion I discuss the implications for deliberative democratic processes.

Mainstream Media Outlets

As previously discussed, a good deal of research has been done on mainstream media, albeit with different empirical foci, and the assessment of coverage is largely negative. Research suggests that mainstream media are not inclusive of diverse voices or ideas on social and political issues and that coverage highlights conflict over consensus (Bagdikian 1997; Bennett et al. 2004; McChesney 1999). To some extent, this applies to the coverage of the abortion issue. On the one hand, mainstream media coverage is fairly inclusive of diverse voices (institutional and social movement actors) and ideas (pro-life and pro-choice frames/packages) in abortion stories. On the other hand, the range of actors and ideas included in the discourse are those that emphasize conflict (or the battle over values, tactics, and visions of public good) rather than consensus or potential compromise among opponents. This, of course, does not mirror reality because, although small, there is a “common ground” movement in the abortion debate. Pro-life and pro-choice activists work together in communities across the United States to reduce unwanted pregnancies, improve services for pregnant women, and curb violence against women. However, these efforts are either denigrated or ignored all together. In a Lexis-Nexis search of *The New York Times* from 1980 to 2000, the common ground movement was only the topic of four news articles and 17 editorials and letters to the editor. Only one of the four news stories, written by Tamar Lewin (a long-time reporter for *The New York Times*), did not denigrate the efforts of pro-life and pro-choice advocates to work together on the abortion issue. Lewin (1992) writes:

Two years ago the director of the largest abortion clinic here telephoned the leading anti-abortion lawyer in the state with a revolutionary proposal. B. J. Isaacson-Jones, the director of Reproductive Health Services, invited Andrew Puzder, the lawyer, to come talk to her at the clinic in the hope of finding common ground to help women and children. Joined by a handful of others on both sides of the abortion issue, the meetings have regularly continued, trying to move beyond the quagmire that for 20 years has trapped the abortion debate in hostilities The St. Louis common-ground movement is still nascent and has only recently begun to yield tangible results. Both sides stress that while they would like to see a kind of disarmament in the abortion wars they will continue to disagree about abortion and will never compromise their positions

on it. But after 20 years of protests, mass arrests and firebombings, some on both sides of the debate say, learning to talk together presents the only real hope for a peaceful future Among the participants in the St. Louis talks, there is now enough trust to make joint action possible. For example, several months ago, when a pregnant 10-year-old came to the abortion clinic, but decided to carry her pregnancy to term, Jean Cavender, the clinic's director of public affairs and a participant in the common-ground talks, called Ms. Wagner for help. She told Ms. Wagner that the girl needed to stay in bed because the pregnancy was medically complicated but that because her mother worked there was no one to care for her during the day. Ms. Wagner then raised enough money in anti-abortion circles to pay for an attendant and found a woman willing to go into the girl's dangerous, drug-infested neighborhood. The baby was later put up for adoption The common-ground group also worked together last spring on legislation in Missouri to pay for the treatment of pregnant drug addicts.

In short, this kind of coverage is the exception and the abortion debates are generally framed as a "battle" between uncompromising opponents.

Mainstream journalists, editors, and producers cite three reasons for highlighting conflict in the abortion debate. First, journalists cite the limits of outlet formats, which prohibit more than fairly superficial, events-driven stories. A senior producer from NBC noted:

I always make a point of reminding people of how long our broadcast is and literally I have been known to beg people to read something. Read a newspaper. Read a magazine. I don't care what magazine it is but for God's sake do not depend on us. Don't make us your sole source of news because you are short-changing yourself When you have two minutes and you are trying to do a really complicated and an emotionally charged issue like abortion, you cannot hope to do more than say here's the issue, here's where the right to life folks come down on it, here's where Planned Parenthood or NARAL come down on it, here's the status of the court case or legislation It is a structure we have chosen to live with, and so 11 million people are going to get good, concise, well-written, carefully checked coverage on X number of things.

Second, journalists presume there is a general understanding of, and given the long history of the abortion debate, a lack of interest in the issue. As a result, the newsworthiness of the abortion issue has declined and, when they write stories, journalists simply report the "latest wrinkle" of the abortion debate. Finally, journalists, and editors in particular, argue that the increased focus on profitable, rather than important, news has fundamentally altered how social and political issues like abortion are covered. A former editor-in-chief at *Time* explained:

Understand, the magazine has changed dramatically I never ever went to a focus group. I never cared what a focus group would have said about *Time* magazine and I did not care what the readers thought of the magazine. Our responsibility was to guide the readers to what they didn't know. Not to find out what they didn't know and wanted to read about I never cared what they wanted to read about because that's not why they bought it. They bought it to find out what they didn't know they should read about The reason for it is the increase of financial pressures. The need to annually increase the

net profit. To put restrictions on editors and what they could do because the object became to sell the magazine rather than to have it fulfill its traditional role. That's why it's changed so much. The editors have had no choice about it.

In sum, economic pressures external to the journalistic field do not preclude inclusivity, but do tend to emphasize conflict among opposing points of view. Moreover, journalists reinforce this conflict orientation by assuming that the broader public is familiar with the abortion issue and by allowing this assumption to affect the kinds of stories they write. Given this emphasis, it is not surprising that the opportunity for dialogue between pro-life and pro-choice supporters is so low. Stories that highlight the latest conflict over legalized abortion do not require balanced discussions regarding how opponents were able to set aside differences in order to achieve "common ground."

Journalistic practices also affect civility in the abortion debate. Recall that mainstream journalists used a partisan rhetorical style in 30.8 percent of the abortion stories, meaning they used labels such as "antiabortion" rather than the preferred terminology. When asked about the use of the label, mainstream journalists argued that "antiabortion" was a more politically neutral description than "pro-life." A journalist at *The New York Times* noted: "To me, the antiabortion [label] is completely accurate. They don't have a monopoly on life . . . They have given the word [life] a spin. But their specific platform is antiabortion in their usage." A senior producer from NBC news agreed and noted:

[Language] is something that has been debated over the years . . . and its impossible to satisfy everyone . . . Where we finally came down was 'pro-choice' and 'antiabortion.' We would get mail from the antiabortion [groups] asking, 'why do we have to be antiabortion? We are pro-life.' And the answer was because the other side is not anti-life and your principle position is that abortion is murder. You are against abortion the same way the church is against the death penalty and abortion.

In all the mainstream outlets, journalists had come to a consensus on the appropriate language to be used in the abortion debate and established standards, which in some cases were codified in a style guide. A journalist from *The New York Times* read the guidelines aloud.

Abortion: the political and emotional heat surrounding abortion gives rise to a range of polemical language. For the sake of neutrality, avoid pro-life and pro-choice, except in quotations from others. In partial terms include abortion rights advocate, antiabortion campaign, or in either case campaign, group, or rally. Antiabortion is an undisputed modifier, but pro-abortion raises objections, when applied to people who say they do not advocate having abortions. Abortionists' carries overtone to self and illegality. In talking about abortion, woman and fetus are more neutral terms than mother for pregnant women and baby for fetus.

However, new issues surrounding abortion challenge these established practices and require journalists to construct new ways of contending with "old" political debates. This is most dramatically illustrated in the debate over "partial-birth abortion," which is a particular abortion procedure used late in a woman's pregnancy (also known as

the D & X procedure). Journalists have tried to define what constitutes political neutrality on this hot button topic unsuccessfully. An editor at *The New York Times* expressed chagrin on how to handle the issue.

I still find that a puzzling issue, I must say. We have tried a number of times, the science writers and so on, to really sort the issue out and talk about what it is really. What is partial birth abortion? And, are there a lot of them or are there very few of them? I find I have trouble just understanding it. I don't think we have been totally successful [at handling this issue]. But, you are right. It is a very hot issue. And the wording matters. The way it is worded (pause); it is powerful wording.

Journalists also expressed ambiguity over how to report the facts of partial birth abortion. One reporter at *The New York Times* provided her own opinion of the issue and added, "I think that our policy is to use quotes [around the term partial birth], and then at some point [in the story] spell it out."

In short, normative pressures internal to the journalistic field affect the quality of mainstream media discourse. While scholars argue that mainstream journalists must actively define what constitutes neutrality (Clayman and Reisner 1998; Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978a), this is clearly easier said than done—even on enduring political issues. Catch phrases generated by social movement groups (Rohlinger 2006) can be powerful and capture public attention, but the minutiae of political debates can make it difficult for journalists to parse out and convey "the facts" to broader audiences in neutral or even consistent ways. This, in turn, creates ambiguity and provides barriers to establishing practices that are consistent with broader occupational values.

Political Media Outlets

While there is very little research on political outlets, some scholars have suggested that discourse in these venues is not much better than that of mainstream outlets. For example, Bourdieu (1998b:73–74) argues that

"serious" journalists and newspapers are ... losing their cachet as they suffer under the pressure to make concessions to the market, to the marketing tactics introduced by commercial television, and to the new principle of legitimacy based on ratings and "visibility." These things, marketing and media visibility, become the—seemingly more democratic—substitute for the internal standards by which specialized fields once judged cultural and even political products and their producers. Certain "analyses" of television owe their popularity with journalists—especially those most susceptible to the effects of audience ratings—to the fact that they confer a *democratic legitimacy* to the market model by posing in *political* terms ..., what is a problem of *cultural* production and diffusion.

However, given that there are differences among outlets in the journalistic field, scholars should be careful not to assume that the output (in this case, the quality of content) is the same as mainstream venues. In fact, the above findings indicate that this assessment is not correct. Political outlets are inclusive, civil, and provide an opportunity for dialogue among generally like-minded points of view. This is largely a function of journalistic principles and practices that are specific to political venues.

Unlike mainstream media journalists, political journalists are not required to be politically neutral and have a professional obligation both to report and interpret the news. As a result, journalists in these venues can assume a distinctive voice and present ideas without them being credentialed by an outside source. In fact, political journalists believe that they offer a corrective to mainstream media, which often distorts group values and goals. A journalist at *Human Events* explained:

We don't believe that the liberal [mainstream] media presents the full correct picture on a whole host of issues, and we're always trying to fill in the gaps or to present the other side. [We try to] present the information that makes the conservative argument coherent and full.

An editorial director at *The Nation* described the outlet's role similarly, noting that liberal outlets are important in the face of a "powerful Right Wing" that increasingly controls culture, through the ownership of media outlets, and politics. He explained: "Mass media follows politics . . . [and politics] are moving steadily to the right." The goal of *The Nation*, then, is to correct the visible "right slant" of mainstream media. This, of course, requires journalists to address inaccuracies perpetuated by mainstream media journalists directly, which is why journalists are regularly included in political media coverage.

Political journalists' conceptualizations of their role in the mass media industry affect journalistic routines. For example, journalists do not assume that their audience is knowledgeable about the nuances of abortion simply because it is an enduring political issue. As such, political journalists define the newsworthiness of the abortion issue in much broader ways, which affects when they cover abortion as well as the kinds of stories they write. A journalist at *Human Events* noted:

In recent history, abortion and abortion related matters are frequently in the news. It's obviously an issue that's related quite intimately to what's going on with the confirmation or non-confirmation of people the President has [nominated] to federal courts. It gets involved in the appropriations process on the Hill, what they're going to spend money on, what they're not going to spend money on. It's involvement in the authorization of various agencies and we have major issues in recent years including the stem cell cloning issue . . . [and] the partial birth abortion issue . . . Human Events will break stories from time to time when we hear about things that are going on that involve government policy that are related to abortion that people don't know about. We try to say [to our audience], "Look! Here's something that's going on."

An editor from *Ms.* echoed this sentiment, noting that the magazine covered abortion "when there are actions that are lessening women's rights of abortion. Like, all the time lately." In other words, newsworthy events do not just affect policy, law, and morality, but also potentially affect discourse and the public's knowledge about the abortion issue. Thus, movies, books, reports, and new technology that affect fetal technology or how the abortion procedure is done, are all events that potentially warrant discussion in partisan outlets.

Discourse in political outlets, of course, is not perfect. First, political outlets are not immune to economic pressures, and this affects media discourse. Unlike mainstream outlets, political outlets cannot rely on advertising revenue alone. As such, they must make up revenues through grants, foundations, and individual

donors.²⁸ For example, the website for *The Nation* pleads to “committed readers” to contribute funds to The Nation Associates, which helps the outlet cover its “substantial annual deficit” (www.thenation.com/support). Similarly, *National Review* notes that to take the outlet “to the next level we need to hire more full-time investigative reporters and editors. While we have funding commitments for limited growth, to really make a splash we’ll need more than the funding pledged” (www.nationalreview.com/donate). The journalistic staff for these outlets, then, is relatively small, which means political outlets heavily rely on freelancers to fill in the news gaps. This is particularly true when it comes to international events. An editorial director at *The Nation* explained:

Well, we can’t automatically send writers around the world and we have to have an official article rather than a general [one]. We pay less money per piece, so not everyone can afford to write for us. We have to look for ways to augment the fee that writers are paid for the assignment through foundations and things like that. We can’t support a writer for a year to look into a story the way the *New Yorker* can. So, we have lots of academics that write for us because their life is paid for by the academy, and they turn their specialty into our generalistic article.

Thus, political outlets must make a special effort to find freelancers who will cover happenings in ways that are consistent with their particular worldview. Of course, the reliance on freelancers means that mainstream journalistic practices may bleed into and affect the quality of discourse in political outlets. This is one explanation for the relatively high percentage of neutral rhetorical styles in political coverage.

Second, although political journalists use an ideological lens to interpret the news for their audiences, they also determine what organizations and ideas are worthy of inclusion. This is clear in conservative outlets where journalists rarely discussed pro-life groups that engaged in direct action or used violence to shut down clinics. When asked why these individuals were excluded, journalists made distinctions between the “real” pro-life movement and individuals that engaged in dramatic and violent action on behalf of the pro-life cause. A journalist at *National Review* noted: “We have not regarded it [violence at clinics] as a huge story. We regard them [individuals who commit violent acts] as a small fringe, who are receiving appropriate punishments when apprehended.” While the sentiment is understandable, it is problematic that conservative journalists choose to ignore the activities and ideas of radicals. First, whether or not the use of violence to end abortion is an acceptable tactic is a debate among conservatives, and religious conservatives in particular (Blanchard 1995; Mason 2002; Risen and Thomas 1998). Thus, political outlets should provide a venue where such activities can be discussed openly so that group members may determine the extent to which this fits with a broader ideology, if at all. Second, as I mentioned in the previous section, these activities get a great deal of negative attention in mainstream outlets, which are aimed at the general public. Failing to provide a counterinterpretation potentially undermines in-group and broader public perceptions of conservative values on the abortion issue.

²⁸Both *Ms.* and *The Nation* also raise funds by sponsoring cruises. A *Ms.* fundraising cruise recently came under fire by young feminists, who used the cruise as an opportunity to film a documentary questioning feminist, progressive politics (www.pmsmedia.org).

In sum, field theory, as discussed by new institutionalists and Pierre Bourdieu, provides a theoretical lens through which we can understand the quality of media discourse in mainstream and political outlets. Field theory highlights the external and internal pressures that affect mass media discourse as well as the ways in which these factors come to bear on different kinds of media outlets. It is clear that economic pressures and occupational principles, norms, and values play different roles in mainstream and political outlets and affect discourse in different ways. Journalists in political outlets conceptualize their role in the media industry differently than that of mainstream journalists. Rather than providing objective accounts of news events, political journalists interpret the news for broader audiences. Moreover, these interpretations are constructed in relation to that of mainstream venues and, as such, offer a corrective to biased coverage, which generally includes a fuller account of social and political events. While political outlets have better quality media discourse, at least according to the criteria measured, it is not perfect. Economic pressures mean that political outlets cannot afford to employ a large number of journalists on a full-time basis and, as such, rely heavily on freelancers, who simultaneously write for mainstream and political outlets and inject mainstream norms and values into political coverage. That said, the economic pressures in mainstream venues are more severe in terms of the market effects on abortion discourse. While abortion stories are generally inclusive, there is a clear emphasis on conflict around the abortion issue with journalists covering social movement groups and frames/packages that stress opposition more often than those that do not. This focus on conflict is exacerbated by mainstream journalists themselves who assume that the audience is familiar with, and has taken a firm position on, abortion. As such, mainstream journalists cover the “latest wrinkle” of the debate rather than provide the history of or common ground on abortion.

CONCLUSION: DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

What does this mean for deliberate democratic processes? At the outlet level, this means that political discourse meets the normative criteria of the discursive tradition better than mainstream media venues. Specifically, political discourse generally provides a forum where group values, interests, and visions of common good can be articulated. That said, there are limits to what kinds of views are discussed in political discourse. Journalists ultimately decide what groups and ideas are legitimate and worthy of discussion. This affects the discursive processes internal to groups because it ultimately circumscribes debate and predetermines what kinds of points of view are unacceptable. This may have the opposite effect than intended by journalists. For example, conservative journalists ignore violence, claiming that individuals/groups committing this violence are not part of the “real” pro-life movement. However, silence on this issue does not necessarily undermine its perceived legitimacy with some group members. In fact, pro-lifers who advocate violence may interpret silence as tacit approval by cultural authorities speaking on behalf of the movement (Rohlinger 2006).

According to the discursive democratic tradition, mainstream media discourse should promote consensus among pluralistic groups. However, mainstream discourse almost exclusively focuses on conflict in the abortion debate. Even on the “inclusivity” measure, where mainstream outlets seemingly do well, conflict shapes what ideas and who is included in the discourse. As such, the efforts of pro-life and pro-choice groups to find “common ground” on abortion are either excluded or denigrated in

mainstream discourse. Moreover, we see that journalistic practices clash with the normative criteria of the discursive tradition. This is particularly clear in the discussion of civility, where journalistic practices regarding “neutrality” preclude self-definition. Specifically, mainstream journalists reject the self-definition as “pro-life” in favor of the more politically neutral “antiabortion” label. While this terminology choice may make sense from a journalistic point of view, if self-definition is important to deliberative processes, journalistic labeling is problematic and circumscribes communicative action.

The limitations of mainstream media discourse have a broader implication for deliberate democratic processes. While I contend that scholarly work cannot focus theoretical and empirical attention on mainstream outlets alone, general audience media are incredibly important to democracy. The relationship between mainstream and political outlets is relatively clear. Political outlets operate at the group level and provide an arena for a group’s internal discursive processes, which allow groups to participate in deliberative processes at the society level more effectively. Mainstream outlets operate at the societal level and incorporate these diverse groups into a larger discursive process that emphasizes consensus building and common good. Because mainstream discourse focuses on conflict, the most salient values and interests at the group level may not move from the “periphery” to the “center” of society because they do not fit with the conventions of covering an issue. In fact, mainstream discourse is at risk of representing the most extreme elements as representative and speaking on behalf of an entire group, further undermining deliberative processes.

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METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

The critical discourse moments were generated by different kinds of happenings, including judicial decisions, federal legislation, elections, executive nominations, and social movements. The following is a list of the events and their importance.

Supreme Court Decisions:

- *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, decided on July 3, 1989, upheld a state law that ruled human life begins at conception, barred the use of state hospitals for abortions, and required fetal viability testing.
- *Ohio v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health et al.* decided June 25, 1990, ruled a state can require a waiting period and parental notification before administering an abortion on a minor, but also made a judicial bypass provision.
- *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, decided June 29, 1992, upheld a 24-hour waiting period before the administration of an abortion as well as required anti-abortion counseling and parental consent for minors.

Federal Legislative Debates and Votes:

- The Human Life Bill. In August 1982, the U.S. Senate began debating the Human Life Bill, which declared that human life began at conception and gave full constitutional rights to fetuses. Ultimately, the bill failed.
- The Gag Rule. On July 27, 1987, President Reagan proposed a new rule for Title X-funded clinics, which forbade clinic personnel from counseling a client about the abortion procedure even if the client requested the information. The Department of Human and Health Services adopted and instituted the rule 30 days later.
- Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE). On May 26, 1994, President Clinton signed FACE into law. The legislation made it a federal crime to use force or the threat of force, or physical obstruction to injure, intimidate, or interfere with clinic providers or their clients.
- Partial Birth Abortion Ban debate in Congress. On March 20, 1997, the House of Representatives voted to ban the D & X procedure (also known as the partial birth abortion procedure), which is a particular kind of late-term abortion. While the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 1997 passed in Congress, it was vetoed by President Clinton.

Presidential Elections and Nominations:

- The 1984, 1988, and 1992 presidential elections.
- The nomination of Judge Robert Bork to the Supreme Court on July 1, 1987, the nomination of Dr. David Satcher to Surgeon General on September 12, 1997, and the nomination of John Ashcroft to Attorney General on December 22, 2000.

Social Movement Activities:

- The annual commemoration of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which legalized abortion in the United States.
- The bombing of an abortion clinic on January 1, 1985 (which was the first bombing during the peak of such violence).
- The 1993 murder of abortion provider, Dr. David Gunn.