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Accepted version. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2016): 180-234. DOI. ©
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“The Birth Control Divide” U.S. Press Coverage of Contraception, 1873-2013

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Abstract: For more than 140 years, religious, medical, legislative, and legal institutions have contested the issue of contraception. In this conversation, predominantly male voices have attached reproductive rights to tangential moral and political matters, revealing an ongoing, systematic attempt to regulate human bodies, especially those of women. This analysis of 1873-2013 press coverage of contraception in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune* shows a division between institutional ideology and real-life experience; women's reproductive rights are negotiable. Although journalists often reported that contraception was a factor in the everyday life of women and men, press accounts also showed religious, medical, legislative, and legal institutions debating whether it should be. Contraception originally was predominately viewed as a practice of prostitutes (despite evidence to the contrary) but became a part of everyday life. The battle has slowly evolved into one about the *Affordable Care Act*, religious freedom, morality, and employer rights. What did not significantly change over the 140-year period are larger cultural and ideological structures; these continue to be dominated by men, who retain power over women's bodies.

Keywords [contraception](#), [birth control](#), [press coverage](#)

Half the speakers thought it was our duty to practice birth control and surmised sagely that most of us were doing our duty anyway. And the other half said we were “prostitutes and felons” if we did. Which was quite horrid—either way. ([Whitaker, 1917b](#), p. 14)

[Contraception] is not OK. It's a license to do things in the sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be. (Rick Santorum, quoted in [Abcarian, 2012a](#), p. 13)

These two quotes, the first taken from the *Los Angeles Times* in 1917, the second from the *Chicago Tribune* in 2012, are evidence of a heated and ongoing debate over contraception. Well over a century old, this debate continues to embroil religious, medical, legislative, and legal institutions across the United States. The topic of contraception generates press coverage and stimulates discussion about women and men's access to and use of birth control, rendering visible institutional attempts to regulate human bodies, especially those of women. Despite the apparent widespread acceptance and practice of birth control throughout history and across cultures, the issue continues to divide clergy, doctors, politicians, and judges—who are predominantly male and who are cultural and governmental moralists who direct (and misdirect) the debate about the boundaries of women's reproductive rights. Control of the female body is the terrain over which these men fight.

This monograph examines press coverage of contraception in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune* beginning in 1873, when Congress passed a law making illegal the possession or distribution through the mail any information or material intended for the prevention of conception or the procurement of abortion (this did not include information about abstinence or the rhythm method). The study ends in 2013, one year after the 2012 presidential election wherein the contraception mandate of the Affordable Care Act became hotly contested. Our goal is to understand the cultural narrative told at key moments over the past 140 years about contraception, the women and men who sought and used it, and those who sought to control their ability to do so. This narrative portrays institutional efforts to regulate women's access to and use of birth control. Religious, medical, legislative, and legal organizations have contested birth control practices for more than a century, but rarely as a matter of women's health. Instead, they have attached contraception to tangential issues, using eugenics, population control, physician rights, religious freedom, and abortion as rhetorical smokescreens. By shrouding the topic in moral and political

controversy in this way, they prevent contraception from being discussed as part of women's health care. Meanwhile, contraception use remains part of everyday lived experience. While men and women use and talk about contraception as common practice, institutions debate whether they should.

Significance of Research

A historical examination of press coverage of contraception is important for three reasons. First, in the context of a research tradition that situates journalism as a repository for cultural narratives, this work contributes to our understanding of the way news orients us to our communities and helps create a sense of commonality and cultural history ([Bird & Dardenne, 1997](#)). Taken collectively, news stories, editorials, and even letters to the editor convey a "continuing story of human activity" ([Bird & Dardenne, 1997](#), p. 335) and serve to reaffirm the social order ([Gans, 1980](#)) as part of a larger symbolic system ([Geertz, 1973](#)). News narratives provide a way to "create order out of disorder" by offering "reassurance and familiarity" as well as "credible answers" and "ready explanations" to complex issues, including those surrounding contraception ([Bird & Dardenne, 1997](#), p. 336). They also contain social values and norms, suggesting what should count as important and desirable within a community ([Gans, 1980](#)). Told repeatedly across time and space, press narratives then become part of our collective memory ([Kitch, 2002](#); [Zelizer, 1992](#)).

An examination of press coverage of contraception as cultural narrative also contributes to our understanding of the gendering of news, which research has shown is decidedly masculine ([Poindexter, Meraz, & Schmitz, 2008](#); [Rakow & Kranich, 1991](#)). While newspapers have historically worked to bring in women viewers, primarily to meet the needs of advertisers and encourage consumption, newspaper content targeting women has been largely relegated to women's pages or the back of the newspaper ([Harp, 2007](#)). Topics or issues directly affecting women, such as contraception, have historically received "second-tier" treatment ([Poindexter et al., 2008](#)) or have been ridiculed, dismissed, or ignored by the press ([Faludi, 1992](#); [Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004](#)). Furthermore, women rarely appear as news sources or newsmakers but rather as signs in "ritualized roles," thereby conveying meaning rather than generating it ([Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004](#), p. 15). In other words, when women do appear in news stories,

they tend to speak for institutions or organizations, not for themselves as subjects ([Poindexter et al., 2008](#); [Rakow & Kranich, 1991](#)). Analysis of press coverage of contraception, therefore, informs our understanding about what it means to be a woman or man seeking reproductive control and whether she or he has “full and equal participation” within the public debate ([Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004](#), p. 95).

Second, an examination of press coverage of contraception over time provides insight into what [Raymond Williams \(1977\)](#) called a “structure of feeling” that exists at certain moments in history. A structure of feeling signifies the “culture of a period” ([Williams, 1961](#), p. 64) and captures the struggle between ideology and lived experience by incorporating “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” ([Williams, 1977](#), p. 132). Williams advocated examining material culture, including newspapers, because it often includes aspects of our material and social life and can capture structures of feeling as they emerge ([Brennen, 2008](#)). While these moments can be contextualized and situated within existing power structures (e.g., religious, medical, legal, political) and dominant ideologies, representations of lived experience are not universal. An examination of specific moments in press coverage of contraception provides insight into how those on both sides of the contraception debate struggled with the larger ideology regarding contraception at a particular moment (e.g., it is sinful) and how they actually lived it (e.g., they opened birth control clinics). Analysis of press coverage, therefore, allows us to examine the processes used by existing power structures to disseminate the dominant ideology regarding contraception *as well as* efforts to reject or subvert that ideology.

At the same time, the production of cultural artifacts, such as newspapers, is a political activity that seldom involves citizens representing themselves as citizens but instead privileges those in positions of power ([Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004](#)). As [Carter and Steiner \(2004\)](#) remind us, media texts “dissemble the extent to which they are aligned with the interests of powerful groups in society” (p. 2). As such, women of color or poor people, among other groups, may be denied the opportunity or the means of participation in the creation of mediated texts or their meaning ([Poindexter et al., 2008](#); [Rakow & Kranich, 1991](#)). Examining the structures of feeling at specific

moments in contraception history allows us to gain insight into how the press aligned the contraceptive narrative with the voices it included or ignored.

Numerous scholars have examined the legal, social, and political history of birth control ([Baer, 2002](#); [Brodie, 1994](#); [Engelman, 2011](#); [Gordon, 1990](#); [Hajo, 2010](#); [Joffe, 1986](#); [Reed, 1978](#); [Tone, 1997](#)) and the work of activists such as Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman ([Bone, 2010](#); [Buerkle, 2009](#); [Lumsden, 2007](#); [Rogness & Foust, 2011](#)). Press coverage of birth control has received less attention, although some scholars have looked at this ([Bone, 2010](#); [Endres, 1968](#); [Faludi, 1992](#); [Flamiano, 1998](#); [Garner, 2014](#); Garner & Mendez, 2014; [Kruvand, 2012](#)). Among those who explored the rhetorical strategies and aims of birth control columns and advertisements, [Bone \(2010\)](#), for example, found that Sanger used rhetorical appeals to advocate contraception in the *New York Call*, *The Woman Rebel*, and *Family Limitation*. Examining the target audiences of birth control ads printed in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in the 19th century, [Endres \(1968\)](#) found that physicians and pharmaceutical companies advertised primarily to reach affluent women seeking contraception. Others have documented contraception as a subject of contentious debate and controversy.

[Faludi \(1992\)](#) documented how the press—along with other legal, political, religious, and social institutions—responded to women's increasing reproductive freedom with an "outpouring of repressive outrage" (p. 414) in the 1980s, while largely ignoring the views of women impacted by the hostility. [Flamiano \(1998\)](#) found that the *New York Times*, *New Republic*, and *Harper's Weekly* focused on "race suicide," the morality of women, religious views on contraception, and family planning. [Kruvand's \(2012\)](#) analysis of 50 years of the *New York Times* coverage of the pill showed that the debate over the morality and safety of contraception has remained fairly consistent even as news sources and frames have shifted. Finally, comparing coverage of contraception in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* between 1873 and 1917, [Garner \(2014\)](#) found that the former newspaper focused on the battle between the supporters and opponents of the 1873 Comstock Act whereas the latter portrayed the debate as a battle of ideas. An examination of 2000-2013 coverage by the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* determined that women's voices have been largely excluded from public debates about

contraception ([Garner & Mendez, 2016](#)). This study extends this scholarship by examining coverage of contraception by the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Tribune* between 1873 and 2013.

Method

This study starts with 1873, the year the Comstock Act, which prohibited any production or publication of information pertaining to the procurement of contraception or abortion, was enacted, and continues until 2013. This 140-year time period allows for a longitudinal look at contraception press coverage in three major newspapers: The *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. These newspapers were selected primarily because of their long publication histories and large circulations as well as their different geographical regions. They also offer diverse political positions. Both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, lean liberal today, but they self-identified as conservative publications for the first few decades after 1873 ([E. Davis, 1921](#); [Hart, 1975](#)). The *Chicago Tribune*, on the other hand—known as the *Chicago Daily Tribune* until 1963—maintained a politically liberal outlook during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and then tilted toward a more conservative position ([Wendt, 1979](#)). The paper self-identifies as moderate today.

To identify key moments in press coverage of contraception, we first drew a saturation sample of every news story, editorial, and letter to the editor on the topic. We searched the online databases for each newspaper using four key phrases: Comstock, birth control, contraception, and feminine hygiene (a common euphemism for contraception that originated in the 1880s; [Hajo, 2010](#)). For the 1873-1909 period, we included articles from all 36 years of coverage because so few articles were published. Otherwise, the results were too numerous to be feasibly included, so we sampled 11 time periods: 1873-1909, each of the nine decades from 1910 to 1990, and 2000-2013. We focused primarily on one peak year per paper, per time period. For some of the study's 11 time periods, coverage peaked in the same year for each newspaper; 1968, for example, saw the most contraception press coverage of the 1960s in all three publications. For

other time periods, such as the 1970s, different papers had different peak years. In this latter situation, we selected from each newspaper the year with the most press coverage of contraception.

Throughout our study, we treated “birth control” and “contraception” as interchangeable terms, both defined simply as means of preventing conception. Such means include the rhythm method, barrier methods such as condoms and diaphragms, as well as hormonal methods including birth control pills, intrauterine devices (IUDs), patches, and injections. Permanent methods (i.e., sterilization) were not the focus of our study. We also excluded articles that focused solely on abortion. While we acknowledge that contraception and abortion are intimately related in the reproductive rights debate, we treated contraception as a distinct matter. Doing so allowed us to render visible the ways contraception is conflated with other issues, including abortion, as well as the ways it is discussed—or not discussed—as an issue of its own. Similarly, we excluded articles that discussed contraception only as a means of preventing AIDS. Articles that mentioned AIDS or abortion in a primary discussion of contraception, however, were included in our sample. We ultimately collected 3,604 news stories, editorials, and letters for our textual analysis.

We used a critical literary approach to textual analysis, which allows researchers to dive deep into the latent meaning of a text while also preserving “the complexity of the language and connotation” of the story ([Hall, 1975](#), p. 15). This method allowed us to place news narratives within their larger social and political context ([du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997](#)) and offers insight into how “the press interprets [the] process of social change” ([Hall, 1975](#), p. 11). To identify the treatment and tone of the press coverage, each author individually read the selected articles multiple times, searching for and transcribing words, metaphors, phrases, and sentences that referenced contraception or birth control. We paid attention to the articles’ narrative elements—especially the present and absent voices—and we considered the social and political climate in which they appeared. Then, working together, we organized our findings into overarching topics to identify both the connotative and latent meanings of the text, as well as any overlapping or recurring narratives. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and

examination of the texts. The process allowed us to move beyond the surface meaning of the narrative (e.g., judge orders woman to use contraception) to the underlying meaning (legal efforts to regulate women's bodies). The process also enabled the identification of the dominant stories and voices within the larger narrative about contraception and provided a story of America's 140-year struggle through the personal, cultural, and political changes wrought by contraception. Before presenting this story, we offer a brief overview of birth control prior to 1873, the year our press coverage starts.

A Brief History of Birth Control Before 1873

Euphemized until Margaret Sanger coined the phrase "birth control" in 1914, the use of contraception can be traced back to the early Egyptians ([Engelman, 2011](#)). For over 3,000 years, contraception use was fairly commonplace. Methods included practices such as periodic abstinence, withdrawal, and breastfeeding, as well as products such as condoms and sponges ([Engelman, 2011](#)). Communities knew of efforts to prevent pregnancy through contraception, but these efforts were rarely viewed as illegal ([Engelman, 2011](#); [Platoni, 2010](#); [Thurer, 1994](#); [Tone, 1997](#)). The use of contraceptives was not entirely undisputed, however; many viewed contraception as morally unacceptable and equated it with prostitution ([Engelman, 2011](#); [Platoni, 2010](#)). During the late 1800s, contraception was available through the postal system ([Collins, 2003](#)) or through doctors who quietly provided birth control to married women ([Endres, 1968](#); [Hajo, 2010](#); [Reed, 1978](#)). These events generated little attention from the press. This changed with the passage of the Comstock Act.

In 1873, the United States Congress supported the wishes of moral purist and social reformer Anthony Comstock when it amended the U.S. Postal Code ([Engelman, 2011](#)) and passed the *Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use*. The federal statute criminalized the publication, dissemination, and possession of obscene materials, including "information about or devices or medications for 'unlawful' abortion or contraception" ([Comstock Act, 2012](#)). Opposition to birth control by Comstock, religious fundamentalists, and medical

conservatives occurred at a time when women were moving into the public sphere. Women had entered the workforce in greater numbers and joined social reform groups such as those associated with the suffragist and temperance movements. These events, along with concerns over "race suicide," resulted in a political and cultural backlash by groups and individuals, like Comstock. The Comstock Act was viewed as one "remedy" to women's increasing empowerment ([Engelman, 2011](#); [Faludi, 1992](#); [Gordon, 1990](#)) and remained on the books until 1983 when it was ruled unconstitutional although previous key court rulings already protected doctors who provided contraception information and then legalized contraception use for married and unmarried couples.

Press coverage of contraception laid bare a 140-year struggle between ideology and lived experience. As will be shown, religious, legal, medical, and legislative institutions orchestrated the birth control debate for more than a century, largely ignoring the voices of those who sought and practiced birth control themselves. Between 1873 and 1920, a debate was waged between birth control advocates and a wide range of legal, medical, and legislative opponents, most of whom, on both sides of the debate, spoke as individual citizens, not as institutional representatives.

Beginning in 1930, press coverage reflected a shift in how the debate was conducted, as the Catholic Church became a dominant voice and the topic of contraception was attached to societal issues such as population control and eugenics. By the 1950s the debate shifted again, as non-Catholic groups and the medical community largely withdrew from the battle over contraception access. Politics and religion merged and would remain the dominant voices over the next 60 years.

Below we detail the amount of coverage for each time period examined, indicating in the section heading the specific years examined for that period. The coverage includes news stories as well as the few letters to the editor and editorials that appeared within the sample. Letters to the editor and editorials are identified in the analysis. We begin each section with a brief historical overview of the decade and key events that were occurring at the same time as the contraception debate.

During the first period of our contraception narrative, 1873-1909, a total of 132 news stories were published about contraception: 80 in the *New York Times*, 41 in the *Chicago Tribune*, and 11 in the *Los Angeles Times*. Most of the coverage appeared around the turn of the century, a time before the term "birth control" was part of common parlance. This was a time of fervor and debate about contraception, because of discussions within the social purity and free love movements about human sexuality.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1873-1909

The first period of contraception press coverage, 1873-1909, spanned the end of the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of the Progressive era. Spurred by the temperance, abolitionist, and suffragist movements, begun before the Civil War, Progressive era women continued the civic and philanthropic work they had begun before the war believing they had a responsibility to promote virtue and morality outside the home ([Cutter, 2003](#)). These so-called "Redemptive Mothers" believed the impact of the Industrial Revolution (e.g., unsanitary living conditions, poor working environments, outbreaks of diseases such as typhoid and cholera, public drunkenness) had harmed the country's moral well-being ([Cutter, 2003](#)). They considered it their responsibility to restore public morality and viewed their domestic agenda as part of "municipal housekeeping and [a] political extension of motherhood" ([Cutter, 2003](#), p. 198). They addressed such issues as alcohol consumption, prostitution and venereal disease, and the needs of poor women and children. Some members of the suffragist, temperance, abolition, anti-prostitution, and moral reform campaigns were also members of the purity movement, which opposed not only prostitution but all sexual activity considered immoral, including contraception use. Contraception use was considered morally unacceptable because of its link to prostitution and the belief that only "prostitutes knew of effective birth control techniques" ([Gordon, 1997](#), p. 435). Some activists who opposed contraception, however, championed "voluntary motherhood" through abstinence. Others, including freethinking activists and profiteers who sold contraceptive materials on the black market were not so reserved. They promoted birth control as "feminine hygiene," even while physicians publicly deemed contraceptives "licentious" ([Reed, 1978](#)),

"sordid" ([Hajo, 2010](#)), and a threat to the traditional view of sexual activity as wed to reproduction ([Engelman, 2011](#), p. 12). Ironically, in what is believed to be the first survey of women's sexual activities, Dr. Clelia Duel Mosher of Stanford University surveyed middle- and upper-class women between 1892 and 1912 about their sexual experiences ([Engelman, 2011](#); [Platoni, 2010](#)). While the survey number sample was small (only 45 women), Mosher determined that these Victorian women, contrary to stereotype, knew about sex, enjoyed it, and used some form of contraception ([Platoni, 2010](#)).

Between 1873 and 1909, press coverage of contraception focused on Anthony Comstock and his efforts to enforce his namesake law, showing that, although contraception was practiced at this time, it was clearly done so at great risk after the passage of the Comstock Act.

Anthony Comstock and His Labors

Anthony Comstock believed that evil temptations were everywhere and the path to salvation resided in abstaining from all impure actions and thoughts, including the use of alcohol, gambling, tobacco, prostitution, pornography, and contraception ([Anthony Comstock's Influence, 2016](#)). In 1873, Comstock founded the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice as a committee within the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). The Society's mission was to police public morality in the state and push for stricter immoral conduct laws. The New York state legislature gave the Society's agents, including Comstock, the power to search, seize, and arrest those who failed to comply with laws against immoral conduct including the possession of literary works, newspapers, and popular magazines they deemed immoral ([New York Society for the Suppression of Vice Records, 2012](#)). The *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* portrayed Comstock as a man on a "crusade" ("[Snide,](#)" 1875, p. 9). Comstock had targeted, for example, "new journalism," women's tights, mailboxes that might contain contraceptive information or materials, obscene literature, and lewd pictures ("[Anthony Comstock's Latest,](#)" 1891; "[Foes to New Journalism,](#)" 1897; "[The Private Post-Office Evil,](#)" 1890) effectively expanding the reach of the Comstock Act, even as others worked to

dismantle it ("[Ingersoll's Fight,](#)" 1880). Journalists detailed Comstock's efforts including posing as someone in need of the materials and then arresting the provider. Given the detail journalists provided in their coverage, it is likely the news stories not only served as a warning to readers but also provided insight into how to avoid prosecution.

Both newspapers reported on Comstock's speeches all over the nation to mothers and business, civic, and religious groups about so-called obscene and lewd materials leading to the infidelity and ruination of young women and men, and about the need for mothers to raise moral children. The *New York Times* focused on Comstock's efforts to "better" society by stamping out vice, and news stories frequently listed the materials he seized and the citizens he arrested as evidence of his success. Comstock regularly seized enormous amounts of materials, including, for example, "24 tons of obscene pictures and other things pertaining to the terrible trade of the wretches, male and female, engaged in the vile business" ("[Comstock on Vile Publications,](#)" 1879, p. 2).

Press accounts also portrayed Comstock as regularly bringing charges against the men and women he arrested or testifying against them in court. Just as frequently Comstock appeared to be the defendant who faced charges for battery, fraud, and malicious prosecution. Indeed, Comstock was the frequent victim of his own zealotry. A physician, for example, reportedly assaulted and beat Comstock when he tried to arrest the doctor for "sending objectionable matter through the mails" ("[Comstock Badly Beaten,](#)" 1903, p. 2). Accounts in the *New York Times* or the *Chicago Tribune* challenged neither the legality of Comstock's actions, the ethics of his tactics, nor the beatings he took. Instead, the press treated events surrounding Comstock as commonplace occurrences not requiring commentary.

Finally, news stories showed that Comstock's many supporters and allies regularly praised him and aided him in his work. These supporters included religious groups, the American News Company (a magazine, newspaper, book, and comic book distribution company that operated from 1864-1957), the medical community, and some reporters. The *New York Times* was the only newspaper that wholeheartedly endorsed Comstock, calling him "indefatigable in his efforts" ("[The Suppression of Vice,](#)" 1876, p. 2). The *Chicago Tribune*

was a little more neutral, offering both praise and scorn. An editorial in the newspaper argued that Comstock was worthy of public sympathy, but wryly observed that "Comstock blindfold[ed] himself before disrobing for the night" ("[Current Opinion,](#)" 1878, p. 3). The *Los Angeles Times*, on the other hand, only offered thinly disguised disdain for Comstock, repeatedly referring to him as "St. Anthony" ("[A Nasty Mess,](#)" 1894; "[Slugging of 'St. Anthony,'](#)" 1906).

Comstock's Victims

Between 1873 and 1909, those who desired contraception information and materials were frequently charged, arrested, or harassed by Comstock or his minions. Citizens were arrested for distributing or possessing "obscene" or "lewd" books, pamphlets, pictures, engravings, publications, or advertisements. The editor and proprietor of the *Jersey City Herald*, for example, was reportedly arrested by Comstock for selling an "alleged immoral pamphlet" ("[Suppressing Immoral Literature,](#)" 1875, p. 2). Another individual, John A. Lant, was charged with "mailing an improper publication called 'The Toledo Sun'" ("[Improper Publications,](#)" 1875, p. 3). The *Toledo Sun* was a newspaper published by Lant. Although the exact qualities that made these publications "lewd" or "obscene" or "indecent" or "immoral" were not always clear, press accounts indicated that information, pictures, or materials illustrating the female form or addressing female "issues" drew Comstock's wrath.

Advertisers and providers of instruments or information for contraceptive or abortion purposes, whether women or men, were especially subject to Comstock's attention, as press accounts reported. Dr. Sara Blakesley Chase, for example, was charged with "selling improper instruments" ("[Court Notes,](#)" 1878, p. 2). Chase was described in the news story as a "practicing physician" who had "educational credentials" and lectured on "medical topics," and Madame Ann Lohman Restell, midwife and "professor in the disease of women," was charged with offering "for sale articles for the prevention of conception" ("[The Case of Mme. Restell,](#)" 1878, p. 5). Similarly, Edward W. Baxter was indicted for trying to sell "illegal medicinal powders" ("[Mr. Comstock Meets With Defeat,](#)" 1879, p. 3), William C. Hallock was charged with "publishing and disseminating circulars

detailing the virtues of the medicine to be used for unlawful purposes” ([“Takes Mr. Comstock to Task,” 1901](#), p. 2), and Dr. Sarah A. Summers was charged with aiding the “daughters of clergymen, lawyers, college professors and rich merchants” in pregnancy prevention, and for “procuring a miscarriage” ([“Love-Secret,” 1877](#), p. 12). Though others were also charged with selling contraceptive materials, journalists focused primarily on Comstock and his repeated attempts to ensnare or arrest Dr. Sara B. Chase and Madame Restell. Restell eventually committed suicide. Details of her death, along with her history of arrests for the sale of contraceptives (and for performing abortions), were reported in the *New York Times* ([“End of a Criminal Life,” 1878](#)).

In sum, Comstock’s campaign against contraception in the late 1800s and early 1900s was among the first institutional efforts to prevent women from obtaining birth control. By tying birth control to abortion—and perhaps more importantly, to obscenity—Comstock and his allies contributed to a puritan climate that associated birth control with immorality and promiscuity. The press coverage by all three newspapers contributed to this climate by largely reporting, without question, Comstock’s efforts to stamp out contraception. Only the *Los Angeles Times*, through its references to “St. Anthony,” hinted that perhaps Comstock was going too far. The suppression of birth control literature and devices ignited anger among early birth control advocates, who were able to achieve some victories in the next decade. Press coverage of contraception shifted from a focus on Anthony Comstock and his crusade to a focus on advocates who, capturing the progressive spirit of the time, openly challenged the Comstock Act by establishing clinics and publicly promoting contraception.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1916 and 1917

Press coverage during the 1910s was the highest in the two years leading up to America’s involvement in World War I. During 1916 and 1917, 156 news stories on the topic were published. The *Chicago Tribune* printed 49 stories in 1916, and in 1917 the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* published 51 and 56 stories, respectively. The spirit of the Progressive Era carried America into the

1910s, another decade of political, social, and economic reform. The birth control movement started to take shape in this decade. Margaret Sanger, having coined the term "birth control" in 1914, opened the nation's first clinic in Brooklyn, New York, in 1916. The U.S. government resisted condom distribution during the early years of World War I, but due to increasing rates in sexually transmitted diseases many U.S. troops gained access to condoms overseas and brought them home at the end of the war. Progressive era concerns over the transmission of venereal diseases to "innocents" prompted New York and other states to revise state laws to allow physicians to prescribe condoms for the prevention of disease ([McCann, 1994](#)). Condoms remained illegal as a form of birth control under the Comstock Act, but their use as a "cure and prevention of disease" was legalized in 1918 ([McCann, 1994](#), p. 64).

Once the phrase "birth control" entered the public lexicon, everyone appeared to talk about it. The topic was woven into almost every aspect of daily life, including the decade's books, films, plays, and "picture propaganda." However, press accounts in 1916 and 1917 focused primarily on birth control advocates and their supporters, their birth control activities, and the medical, legal, and legislative responses to birth control.

It bears noting that eugenics and ideas about "race suicide" were also embedded in the discourse, especially in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*. One *Chicago Tribune* news story, for example, argued, "the solution of the Negro problem is birth control" ("[Chicago Women May Face Jail Time on Birth Control](#)," 1916, p. 13). Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a local Methodist minister, Dr. Charles Edward Loeke, argued during a lecture on the "propaganda of birth control" that "race suicide among the people of culture and opportunity and wealth [was] destroying the social balance" ("[Not Fewer but More Babies are Needed](#)," 1917, p. 13). Most expressions in support of eugenics, however, were indirect references to the poor, those deemed "feeble," or the disabled.

Meeting, Advocating, and Going to Jail

Between 1916 and 1917, public meetings to discuss birth control were quite common and were frequently reported in the local

newspaper. Women's clubs, in particular, reportedly held lively meetings wherein sentiments such as "the real white slavery of enforced motherhood," "mere breeding machines," and "a woman's body is her own" were loudly cheered by the women in attendance ([Whitaker, 1917b](#), p. 14). Not everyone attending these meetings, however, favored birth control. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, a "near riot" occurred after someone shouted "Shame" at a birth control meeting attended "by about 2000 persons, mostly women" ("[The World's News in Today's Times](#)," 1917, p. 11). Similarly, at a birth control meeting in Chicago, the local police chief reportedly informed attendees that he would arrest all those "distributing literature giving information on birth control" ("[Find City Law to Bar Birth Control Data](#)," 1916, p. 13). The news story went on to report that the city prosecutor intended to prosecute those individuals for distributing obscene literature. The newspaper, however, reprinted a city ordinance banning the distribution of contraceptive information and materials, and noted that prosecutor "may not need" the obscenity charge ("[Find City Law to Bar Birth Control Data](#)," 1916).

Margaret Sanger and other birth control advocates regularly held public lectures on the topic in New York City and all three newspapers covered these events. According to the *New York Times*, "3000 persons" attended a meeting at Carnegie Hall to hear Sanger and other advocates speak ("[Mrs. Sanger Defies Courts Before 3,000](#)," 1917, p. 4). The advocates sold a pamphlet titled *The Birth Control Review* for 15 cents, fully expecting trouble that ultimately did not materialize. The year before, Mrs. Rose Pastor Stokes, a wealthy socialite and birth control advocate, reportedly challenged the police to arrest her and nearly caused a "stampede" when she told a Carnegie Hall audience that she would distribute information "telling them how to avoid having children" ("[Nearly a Riot to Get Birth Slips](#)," 1916, p. 1). She was not arrested.

Most press coverage, however, focused on the trials and prison sentences of Margaret Sanger and her sister Ethel Byrne. News accounts about Sanger portrayed her as a determined birth control advocate and focused primarily on her arrest and trial after she opened her Brooklyn birth control clinic. They detailed Sanger's trips to court, her arguments before the court, and her time in the workhouse

wherein she charged jail authorities with "unstudied cruelty and heartlessness" ("[Mrs. Sanger Flays Miss Davis's Plans,](#)" 1917, p. 13). Sanger's case, *New York v. Sanger*, ultimately led to a 1918 Appellate Court ruling that approved birth control for the prevention of disease. Sanger's sister Ethel Byrne also received press coverage for her birth control advocacy and arrest after the opening of Sanger's clinic. Reporters focused most notably on Byrne's hunger strike during her prison term in the workhouse and included daily updates on her physical condition and forced feeding ("[How Mrs. Byrne is Forcibly Fed,](#)" 1917). Byrne was eventually released after she reportedly promised the governor of New York that she would refrain from further birth control campaigns ("[Mrs. Byrne Pardoned,](#)" 1917).

Press accounts of Sanger's and Byrne's trials also described their supporters as society women who escorted the women to their trials, held lunches in their honor, and made plans to keep clinics operational while they were in the workhouse ("[Society Women Risk Arrest for Birth Control,](#)" 1916). Sanger also received support from the National Birth Control League, the Birth Control Leagues of California and New York City, and men such as Ben Reitman (anarchist, physician to the poor, lover of Emma Goldman) and William Sanger (Sanger's husband). The Birth Control League, for example, provided legal support for Sanger and sought amendments to federal and state laws allowing doctors and nurses to "give scientific instruction in birth control" ("[Birth Control League Incorporated,](#)" 1917, p. 13). Reporters covered the eventual arrests and trials of Reitman and William Sanger for their birth control activities ("[Reitman Gets Sixty Days,](#)" 1916).

Not all public lectures on birth control were supportive of birth control. Evangelist and former baseball player Billy Sunday frequently lectured large audiences, comprised mostly of women, about the evils and "dirtiness" of women. According to press accounts, Sunday denounced women's suffrage and accused women who used birth control of being "guilty of taking unnatural or criminal means to escape the cross of maternity" ("[Sunday Flays Women's Sins to Women Only,](#)" 1917, p. 1).

Deciding Who Can Dispense Birth Control and Who Can Receive It

The birth control debates did not just occur between advocates and those opposed to the opening of birth control clinics. Members of the medical, legal, legislative, and religious communities likewise debated the issue actively. The medical community held lively discussions about changing existing birth control laws, including the Comstock Act. Dr. S. Adolphus Knopf, for example, argued during a lecture at the American Public Health Association meeting that “judicious birth control [was] not race suicide, but race preservation” ([“Urges Judicious Birth Control,” 1916](#), p. 6). A letter writer argued that physicians should be allowed to provide contraception “to defectives and weaklings, and restrain it” from those who would use it “as a matter of convenience or for selfish ends” ([“Letters to the Times,” 1917](#), p. 5). Such statements reflected the belief that birth control could be used to regulate certain populations, fitting both the growing eugenics movement, which Margaret Sanger supported, and concerns over race suicide. Some doctors reportedly acknowledged that birth control was already available to wealthy populations and should be more widely disseminated to prevent abortions among less wealthy people. Not all members of the medical community agreed, however. One physician, for example, reportedly argued at a meeting of the Society for Medical Jurisprudence at the New York Academy of Medicine that “the poorer class should have large families” so that they could perform “the hard and unpleasant work of the world” ([“Differ on Birth Control,” 1917](#), p. 4). Other doctors attending the meeting reportedly disagreed. Dr. Adolphus Knopf, who supported birth control, reportedly argued that one of the causes of the war was “over-population of Germany,” and it was the “mission of science” to curb the forces of nature, including “the tendency of nature to multiply infinitely” ([“Differ on Birth Control,” 1917](#), p. 4).

Legal, legislative, and religious leaders also debated physicians’ right to distribute birth control. The Attorney General of Chicago, for example, announced no statutes prohibiting birth control dissemination by physicians, as long as distribution was limited to contraception, not abortion ([“May Legalize Birth Control,” 1917](#)). Similarly, a California State Assembly member proposed legalization of “medical advertisements concerning birth control” ([“Happenings on the Pacific Slope,” 1917](#), p. 1). Finally, Reverend William Hess, pastor of Trinity Congregational Church, reportedly argued that the solution to the abuses of child labor was “birth control teaching” given “only by

physicians and registered nurses” ([“Rights of the Child Pleaded in Pulpits,” 1917](#), p. 11). Hess, however, was the only religious leader to support contraception. Most opposed legalization of contraception on the grounds that motherhood was a woman’s social and moral duty. According to the *Los Angeles Times* society columnist [Alma Whitaker \(1917a\)](#), contraception reportedly encouraged women to “use the advocated knowledge for greater license” (p. 12). Similarly, a news brief in the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Dr. Charles C. Selecman [sic] of Trinity Church believed that contraception made “women selfish” and provided an “excuse for women who have nothing else to do but take their pet out for a walk each morning” ([“On Birth Control,” 1917](#), p. 12).

Analysis of the letters to the editor, columns, and editorials suggests that members of the press and public were similarly divided over the topic. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Alma Whitaker, for example, commented on the class differences among those who practiced birth control observing,

The question before us is not whether we shall practice birth-control, which is already rather common, but whether it shall be legitimate to do so, entirely respectable and decent; whether, indeed, public education along those lines shall be universal and seriously recommended to the poor. Especially the poor. ([Whitaker, 1917c](#), p. 4)

Similarly, the newspaper editorially observed in its weekly Pen Points column that Rose Pastor Stokes (referenced above), a wealthy woman, was able to avoid prison while Byrne and Sanger were not ([“Pen Points by the Staff,” 1917](#)). The *Chicago Tribune* made a similar observation when it noted that the “well-to-do” knew about birth control; the paper argued that the information should be available to everyone ([“Editorial of the Day,” 1916](#), p. 14A). The *New York Times* was largely silent on the issue but its female readers were not. Mothers with large families, for example, objected to the suggestion that they use contraception and pushed instead for a continued ban on its distribution ([“A Mother’s View on Birth Control,” 1917](#)). Others opposed contraception on moral grounds or because it would harm women. One woman, for example, was “keenly interested in birth control, though not in favor of it” because it would put every woman “under suspicion” ([“Amelia E. Barr at 87 Works a 9-Hour Day,” 1917](#),

p. 15). Some women opposed to contraception connected its use to World War I, calling the women who practiced it “mean-spirited” in the face of soldiers going off to war ([“Matrimonial Drive of Slackers Stops,” 1917](#), p. 7).

In sum, press coverage of the 1910s documented pioneering moments of the birth control movement. For the first time activists and everyday women had the language to talk about birth control, as well as public outlets to do so. Birth control was still met with resistance, however, especially from institutions that enforced Comstock laws of the decades before. As it was with obscenity in 1873-1909, the topic was again attached to other issues, including eugenics and physician rights, which together suggested that birth control was not a women’s concern but rather one of eugenicists and doctors. Peripheral issues would continue to garner press coverage in the 1920s.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1923, 1927, and 1929

The 1920s were a dramatic time of economic and social change. Often dubbed the “Roaring Twenties,” the decade was characterized by American optimism, prosperity, and consumerism. The country turned inward after its participation in World War I, focusing on private matters and domestic affairs. The decade opened with the enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment, securing voting rights for women. The “new woman” of the decade not only voted, but also challenged other gender norms. She worked in nontraditional professions, embraced the “flapper” look, and rejected ideas about female propriety. Unlike the women of generations past, she publicly smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, and embraced energetic dances such as the Charleston. The flappers also adopted liberal attitudes regarding female sexuality. The birth control movement gained momentum in the 1920s, after Sanger founded the American Birth Control League and organized the first American Birth Control Conference in 1921. Finally, the eugenics movement also gained support in 1927, when the United States Supreme Court upheld forced sterilization of an intellectually disabled woman in *Buck v. Bell*. In that case, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes declared, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough” ([Buck v. Bell](#),

[1927](#)). In the 3 years analyzed in the 1920s, some 170 articles were published about contraception: The *Chicago Tribune* published 32 stories in 1923, the *Los Angeles Times* published 50 in 1927, and the *New York Times* printed 88 news stories in 1929.

Everyone Seems to Be Using It; They Sure Are Talking About It!

Press coverage of contraception in 1923, 1927, and 1929 demonstrated that birth control was part of everyday discourse, and women were willing to admit to its use. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that a majority of college and married women either knew of birth control or used it themselves (["To Aid Science, Women Frankly Admit Spooning," 1923](#)). The *New York Times* described birth control as "widely practiced contrary to law" (["Current Magazines," 1929](#), p. 69) and argued that attempts to repeal the Comstock Act would be successful if all the men and women who practice birth control rallied together (["Notes on Current Magazines," 1929](#)). Even the Comstock-era definition of marriage was challenged thanks to birth control. Judge Ben B. Lindsey reportedly advocated "companionate marriage," which he defined as "legalized marriage with legalized birth control" (["Women Weigh Marital Views," 1927](#), p. 31) with provisions for divorce and alimony. Lindsey's critics, however, argued companionate marriages would disintegrate family life. Nonetheless, the *Los Angeles Times* argued that nothing could stop the birth control movement "unless a means [could] be found to prevent any woman being educated and to render birth control a forgotten aberration of ancient history" (["Scientist Sees Era for Women," 1927](#), p. 5).

Not everyone believed, however, that birth control was inevitable or desirable. News stories opposing birth control invoked American values of self-control, courage, and leadership, implying that birth control opposed these values. Some described birth control as "Communist propaganda" (["Spread of Free Love Attacked," 1927](#), p. 2) and a "menace to morals" (["Birth Control Called Menace to Morals in City's Court Answer," 1923](#), p. 4) while others suggested the country needed self-control, not birth control (["Birth Control Clinic is Legal," 1923](#), p. 3). Even Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini was quoted telling

Americans, "Birth control never made a nation supreme" ("[Lecturer on Life in Europe Due,](#)" 1927, p. 5A).

Nonetheless, press coverage showed a hunger for public forums on birth control. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, reported on an American Birth Control League conference held in 1923, while the *New York Times* reported that many of these meetings were conducted under the watchful eye of the police.

Opening Clinics and Moving Forward

As people talked about contraception, birth control clinics were planned in Chicago and raided in New York City. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the city's officials refused to issue licenses for birth control clinics, but advocates achieved judicial sanction for their clinics in 1923. The *New York Times* carried extensive coverage of a 1929 raid by New York City police of Margaret Sanger's Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau and the community uproar over that raid. Hundreds of physicians, nurses, and civic representatives reportedly assembled in support of those arrested, and members of women's clubs and the Socialist party criticized the police department. The charges against the physicians and nurses were eventually dropped, a decision Sanger reportedly predicted would "put the birth control movement ahead many years" ("[Doctors are Freed in Birth Control Raid,](#)" 1929, p. 20).

Press accounts also showed that Sanger and other advocates were gaining more support from the medical community. Debates continued over the legality of physicians disseminating birth control information, even as some doctors educated readers about birth control methods. Although all three newspapers covered physicians who supported contraception, the *New York Times* was the only paper that represented doctors opposed to it. Unique to the *Los Angeles Times* were "Care of the Body" columns written by Dr. Phillip Lovell, a naturopathic doctor who believed "we should have less abortion and more birth control knowledge" (Lovell, 1927a, p. 26). In fact, most of Lovell's advice urged women to avoid dangerous birth control methods, even as he advocated for men to "equalize the share of responsibility" for birth control (Lovell, 1927b, p. 26L).

The Religious Debate Over Birth Control

Religious voices in the debate over contraception were the strongest in 1929, and the *New York Times* carried the overwhelming majority of news stories about religion and birth control. Catholic and non-Catholic groups worked to establish their public stances toward contraception, and press accounts conveyed a lively debate among the religions regarding the practice. The *New York Times* featured Catholic clergy as well as leaders of Catholic organizations and universities who condemned birth control and its proponents. Indeed, one Catholic priest insisted that advocates were “doing more moral damage than would the importation of a hundred harlots” (“[Pastor Brands Birth Control as Social Vice,” 1927](#), p. 16). Similarly, press accounts also documented efforts by Catholic leaders to influence political and legal decisions on birth control clinics in Chicago, foreshadowing the religious and legal entanglement of the coming decades (“[Mundelein Asks Right to Fight Birth Control,” 1923](#), p. 3).

While religious opposition to birth control reportedly came exclusively from Catholics, support came from Jewish, Baptist, and Protestant leaders. These leaders promoted birth control as a means to cope with overpopulation and insisted that birth control enter a frank and open discussion. An Episcopal reverend, for example, said “clouding the subject in mysterious horror” was unwise (“[Urges Facing Facts about Marriage,” 1929](#), p. 30) while a Baptist pastor said the discussion ought to “be lifted out of suppression and treated in the sunlight” (“[Fosdick for Candor on Birth Control,” 1929](#), p. 25).

Birth Control, Race Betterment, and Population Control

The growing support for birth control was frequently linked to concerns over world population growth. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, argued that birth control would “keep us from stepping on one another’s toes and treading on one another’s heels” (“[Elbow Room,” 1927](#), p. 4A). Overpopulation concerns were also reflected in international stories, which reported on birth control lectures in India, declining birthrates in Germany, and attitudes about birth control in Japan. These news stories also linked these efforts to race improvement. The *New York Times*, for example, cited a professor who argued that birth control should “encourage the production of more strong, healthy, properly spaced children, as well as discourage the production of those who are weak, defective or likely to become unfit

members of society" ("[Birth Control Urged for Improving Race," 1929](#), p. 56). As will be shown below, Americans' support for birth control as a means of dealing with population control and race suicide would only increase over the next decades.

In the 1920s, press coverage of contraception reflected a growing divide between institutional ideology and lived experience, given that birth control clinics were being established and women were admitting they knew about birth control even while religious and legal groups debated whether they should. News stories did not focus on the impact of birth control on individual lives, but focused instead on its ideological impact on institutions. This trend would carry into the next decades, as religion emerged as a loud voice in the debate.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1931 and 1932

With the stock market crash of 1929, America went from a decade of widespread prosperity to one of economic hardship. The 1930s were defined by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, both of which presented a grim economic and social reality for millions of Americans. The birth control movement experienced both victories and setbacks during the Depression. Religious leaders dominated the discussion, perhaps because other institutions were affected by the Great Depression. At a 1930 conference, Anglican Bishops approved limited use of birth control, becoming the first religious body to issue a statement in favor of the practice. In response, the Roman Catholic Church made its first definitive statement on the topic, the *Casti Connubii*, Pope Pius XI's encyclical that opposed birth control by any artificial means. Then, in 1931 the Committee on Home and Marriage of the Federal Council of Churches, a Protestant body of churches, endorsed the earlier conference, voicing guarded acceptance of birth control. Outside the church, condom manufacturers and Margaret Sanger won legal battles that increased the availability of contraceptives. During this time, Depression-era companies adopted the term "feminine hygiene" to market over-the-counter products such as Lysol (commonly used today as a cleaning product), then believed to have contraceptive effects. The 1930s saw 308 stories on contraception. In 1931, the *New York Times* carried the most stories (166), followed by the *Chicago Tribune* (57). The *Los Angeles Times* published 85 stories on the topic in 1932.

An Increasing Openness and Desire for Birth Control

The approval rating of birth control increased during the 1930s, as did favorable opinion about its dissemination. According to press accounts, 80% of Wells College girls, for example, “voted for the right of both unmarried and married persons to have information about contraception” (“[Wells College Girls are For Liberal Laws on Marriage, Divorce,” 1931](#), p. 15). Similarly, “80% of mothers and fathers interviewed [in New York City] wanted to know why ‘knowledge of birth control, for both social and economic reasons, should not be more easily attainable’” (“[Finds Prohibition Irks Working Class,” 1931](#), p. 14). Newspapers carried forecasts about birth control practices, including the predictions that the “fight for birth control will have been won” in 50 years ([Millard, 1932](#), p. 4A) and that birth control would be “universally practiced” ([Lawrence, 1931](#), p. 30A) among future generations. These accounts illustrated that contraception was an important part of men and women’s everyday experience. They wanted it, they used it if they could find it, and they were willing to fight to make it legal.

Press accounts also reflected an ongoing desire for public discussion about birth control. With religious groups leading most of the conversation, however, the public meetings were notably less secular. Although this message was poorly received by Catholic groups, “birth control clinics were advocated” (“[Huge Hunger Loan Urged by Thomas,” 1931](#), p. 5) by the Union Seminary, for example, and “warmly defended” (“[Marriage is Theme of Many Sermons,” 1931](#), p. 19) by the First Humanist Society. A speaker at a German Catholic convention, for example, said “the practice of ‘artificial birth control’ leads to physical, physiological, and psychic disturbances in devotees” (“[German Catholic Group Leader Speaks Against Birth Control in U.S.,” 1931](#), p. 21). The use of the phrase “artificial birth control” by Catholic leaders became increasingly common in press coverage, signaling more nuance in the Church’s opposition to efforts to limit pregnancy. The phrase signaled that the Church was not opposed to all efforts to prevent conception, only certain methods. While these diverse stories provided a snapshot of the lived experience surrounding contraception, they also reflected a change in the national discourse about the topic, especially by institutional structures. Institutions no longer argued with individual advocates; instead they debated within their respective

institutions about contraception, effectively cutting out the men and women who used or desired birth control.

The Papal Encyclical Battle

Press coverage during the first 2 years of the 1930s focused on two key events: The 1930 papal encyclical, wherein Pope Pius XI formally affirmed the Catholic Church's opposition to birth control, and a statement by the Federal Council of [Protestant] Churches in America, which offered limited endorsement of birth control. Additional news stories reflected the verbal tug-of-war between the encyclical's advocates and opponents.

Though all three newspapers covered Pope Pius XI's encyclical, the *New York Times* was the only newspaper to publish it in its entirety and describe it as "a lengthy document of outstanding importance" ("[Pope Pius XI, in Encyclical, Condemns Trial Marriage, Divorce, and Birth Control,](#)" 1931, p. 1). According to the newspaper, Catholic clergy and laypeople were reportedly united in their opposition to birth control but the news coverage focused primarily on the clergy's response. Catholic clergy in New York, for example, hailed the encyclical and asserted that "birth control mean[t] selling one's soul for selfishness" ("[Birth Control Issue Arouses Catholics,](#)" 1931, p. 22).

While Catholics were portrayed as united around the papal encyclical, journalists uncovered divisions among and within Protestant religions over the 1930 statement on birth control by the Federal Council of Churches. The Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Lutheran communities (clergy and laity) all rejected the Council's endorsement of contraception, whereas the Methodist and Congregational communities were divided. Nonetheless, the Council's statement on birth control led the *New York Times* to observe that "change is coming over the Christian mind with reference to certain aspects of the marriage relation in family life" ("[Change in Christians Seen,](#)" 1931, p. 4). On the surface, these debates appeared to turn on whether a religion agreed with birth control and/or the encyclical. But they also foreshadowed the future role of religious ideology, especially Catholic ideology. Largely silent in the decades leading up to the 1930s, the papal encyclical and the statement by the Federal Council of Churches signaled that religious groups were claiming authority over the issue.

The Medical Establishment's Position

The religious debate over contraception spilled into the medical community: Doctors were also divided along religious lines. The Catholic Physicians' Guild, for example, reportedly criticized the Federal Council of Churches for its guarded support of birth control. One physician "urged constant watchfulness and constant opposition . . . to keep the movement in check and cause it to die a natural death" ("[Plan World Fight on Birth Control](#)," 1931, p. 19). Meanwhile, non-Catholic physicians, especially women, advocated birth control. The Medical Women's National Association voiced its support for the practice ("[Birth Control Urged by Women Physicians](#)," 1931) as did individual physicians. One woman, a surgeon, even went on a hunger strike to protest federal laws prohibiting birth control ("[Woman Surgeon on Hunger Strike Dying in Jail](#)," 1931).

As doctors argued over religion and contraception, debates over physicians' rights to disseminate birth control information also continued, this time in Congress. In 1931, a Massachusetts senator reportedly urged enactment of a bill that "would put contraception in the hands of the medical profession" ("[Birth Control Ban Fought by Doctors](#)," 1931, p. 21). Margaret Sanger joined the congressional debate, arguing that "opposition to [the bill] is based 'mainly on personal opinions and not backed up on facts'" ("[Birth Curb Defender's Pleas Heard](#)," 1932, p. 3).

While these larger ideological debates occurred, the *Los Angeles Times* continued to run Dr. Lovell's "Care of the Body" columns. His columns indicated that women sought and used birth control in spite of the institutional debates about it. In the 1930s, Lovell incorporated the term "feminine hygiene" into his columns, perhaps to warn of the dangers of "so-called cleansing agents, antiseptics, germicides, and contraceptives" (Lovell, 1932a, p. 26). Lovell compared birth control practices in America to those in France and England, which did "not have anywhere near the sexual complications, the dark and secret abortions, the terrible poisoning of wrong contraceptives and all the other typical troubles" (Lovell, 1932b, p. 26L) that America did. Lovell's comments represent a significant positive shift in how some members of the medical community viewed contraception and the women who used it. His references to how birth control was viewed

internationally signaled his own endorsement of the European approach to contraception.

Birth Control as a Solution to Society's Problems

As the religious and medical communities debated contraception, newspapers, especially the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, highlighted a growing public debate over eugenics. One physician, for example, described himself as an "advocate of judicious, scientific, and ethical birth control for medical, sanitary, eugenic, human, and moral reasons" ("[Advocating Birth Control](#)," 1931, p. 23), while Judge Ben Lindsey—the 1920s proponent of "companionate marriage"—advocated for birth control under certain circumstances, explaining "the majority of defectives and criminals come from large, unwanted families" ("[Judge Talks on Moral Anarchy](#)," 1932, p. 5). Even school superintendents urged that "birth control, eugenics, and sterilization of the unfit at least receive thoughtful consideration" ("[Aid for Dull Pupils Urged on Teachers](#)," 1931, p. 30). Finally, the American Eugenics Society commended the endorsement of birth control by the Federal Council of Churches as a statement "of outstanding significance to eugenicists" ("[Views Fiction Types as Harmful to Race](#)," 1931, p. 23).

Press coverage also linked eugenics to population control at home and abroad. These articles invoked Malthusian concerns of overpopulation and touted birth control as the solution. According to the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*, respectively, birth control "could remove the menace of overpopulation" ("[Experts Discuss Birth Control, New Economics](#)," 1931, p. 23) and was the "answer to the Malthusian threat of an overcrowded world" ("[Earth's Numbers](#)," 1931, p. 49). Individuals with similar views included a Presbyterian minister who called birth control "the outstanding answer to Malthus" ("[Hoover's Debt Plan Praised by Thomas](#)," 1931, p. 19) and a scientist who said birth control "in the long run may prove to be the salvation of the human race" (Sutton, 1932, p. 17K). These reports signaled an increase in eugenics discourse from the previous decade. They also demonstrated cooptation of birth control as a woman's reproductive rights issue, turning it into a political weapon in the debate over population growth. The tactic would be repeated in the early part of the next decade.

A decade dominated by religious and medical endorsements and rejections of birth control, the 1930s press coverage again privileged institutional voices over those of individual women. Catholic, Protestant, and medical leaders attracted significant press attention, while women's input on the religious statements was absent. The issue was again attached to eugenics, an association that was only strengthened in the next decade.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1940

In the 1940s, coverage was scant, most likely because the country was heading into war; a total of 116 news stories were published about birth control. In 1940, the *New York Times* provided 57 stories, the *Los Angeles Times* 46, and the *Chicago Tribune* 13. The 1940s were defined by World War II, which America entered after the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Under the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the country quickly mobilized its material and human resources for war, an effort that profoundly changed conditions at home and abroad. The 1940s were a relatively quiet decade for the birth control movement. The Birth Control Federation of America (BCFA) changed its name to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc. The U.S. Public Health Service quietly decided to allow states to fund birth control clinics, and by 1945 over 800 clinics existed across the country.

Birth Control as Practice and Commentary in Daily Life

In 1940, all three newspapers reported that people not only approved of birth control, they used it. A Gallup poll showed that 77% of those surveyed approved of birth control for married couples ([Gallup, 1940](#)). The *New York Times* validated that finding by citing the growing prevalence of birth control clinics: It reported that 553 birth-control centers were now functioning in the United States, an increase of 400 within the last 5 years ("[Planned Parenthood," 1940](#), p. 1E). Eleanor Roosevelt's public endorsement of birth control and admission that she had long before contributed to the maintenance of New York City clinics ("[Favors 'Planned Families,'" 1940](#), p. 20) proved to be controversial among some politicians. These events led to Sanger's contention, reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, that the "fight to make legal the dissemination of birth control information and the

establishment of clinics . . . [had] been virtually won" ("[Margaret Sanger Measures Progress in Birth Control](#)," 1940, p. 1A). Press coverage also reflected a shift in rhetoric: News stories used the phrase "planned parenthood," possibly foreshadowing the establishment of the Planned Parenthood Federation in 1942. The rhetorical shift within the press coverage appeared to signal an effort on the part of birth control advocates to shift the larger ideological debate away from women's desire to control reproduction (something larger institutional structures objected to) to one wherein women wanted to plan their reproduction (something institutional structures would find more difficult to oppose).

The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* also drew attention to negative news, including a Connecticut Supreme Court ruling that upheld the constitutionality of the state's anti-birth control law, and rejecting any exceptions to the Comstock Act.

Dr. Lovell on Birth Control and Feminine Hygiene

The increasing number of birth control clinics and public endorsements from community leaders signaled another change in the contraception debate, namely the debate over physicians' right to disseminate birth control information. This change was due, in part, to the 1936 Second Circuit Court of Appeals case *United States v. One Package*, which allowed physicians to distribute birth control across state lines. Evidence that the ruling helped legitimize contraception among physicians and the public could be seen in Lovell's "Care of the Body" columns, which first appeared in the 1920s. Lovell continued to discourage feminine hygiene practices such as douching, explaining that a woman "may be poisoned as a result of contraceptive douches" ([Lovell, 1940b](#), p. 21). Nonetheless, Lovell not only recognized the adverse impact of these contraceptive products but the social impact as well, noting that "the onus of contraception has been placed on women" ([Lovell, 1940a](#), p. 25). The debate in previous decades focused on whether women should be given access and, if so, which women (wealthy or poor), or whether physicians should be given legal authority to dispense contraception. In the 1940s, the medical debate over contraception, as articulated by Lovell, had shifted to a focus on women's health care.

A Better Breed Through Birth Control

Press accounts in the 1940s reported on the continued endorsement of birth control from those promoting eugenics. Of particular note was Fred Hogue's regular column "Social Eugenics" in the *Los Angeles Times*. Hogue frequently referred to overpopulation issues in Germany, France, and Italy. Hogue was not alone in invoking Malthusian ideas of population control as rationale for birth control: The press reported on other organizations and individuals who espoused contraception as a means of race betterment. A conference of the Brooklyn Church and Mission Federation, for example, advocated "methods of limiting families in the interest of social betterment and of racial progress" ("[Churchmen Warn Labor on 'Rackets,'](#)" 1940, p. 13) and the Birth Control Federation of America described contraception as "an indispensable means toward the . . . building of a better race in America" ("[Wider Drive Set for Birth Control,](#)" 1940, p. 13). One physician even recommended birth control among migrants, insisting "quality, not quantity, in human beings is the crying need of a punch-drunk world made so by its imbeciles" ("[Migrant Influx Rise Reported,](#)" 1940, p. 2). The eugenicists, however, did not find support from members of the religious community.

The Religious Birth Control Controversy Continues

As America moved toward an increasingly favorable position regarding birth control, press accounts showed that religious communities remained divided over the issue. Catholic priests, for example, condemned the practice in church sermons, mounting special criticism against activists. One priest reportedly described contraception advocates as "enemies of the family, and, therefore, of society" ("[Need for More Children,](#)" 1940, p. 12); another insisted these individuals were "doing their best to destroy domestic morality" ("Catholic Women March on 5th Ave," 1940, p. 20). While Catholic clergymen opposed birth control, non-Catholic clergymen promoted it as an "expression of moral idealism, dedicated to the protection of life and the promotion of family, health and security" ("[Clergymen Urge Birth Control Data,](#)" 1940, p. 10). Divisions across religious groups would only become more heated in the coming decades with the Catholic Church becoming more adamantly opposed and the non-Catholic groups becoming largely more accepting.

In sum, as in the decades prior, press coverage of contraception in the 1940s reported that Americans were practicing birth control in greater numbers, but religious, medical, and—for the first time—political leaders were debating it. Their debates focused on the tangential issues of eugenics and overpopulation, thereby shifting the focus away from contraception as a reproductive right.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1959

Political voices grew louder in the second half of the 20th century, especially in 1959, the year with the most press coverage of contraception (196 stories). The *New York Times* provided the most coverage (113 stories) followed by the *Los Angeles Times* (55) and the *Chicago Tribune* (38). On the heels of World War II, the country seemed ready to debate the issue again. World War II had firmly secured America's place as a military superpower; wartime production revitalized the country's economy. So the 1950s represented opportunity and optimism. Post-war America also saw developments in the birth control movement. In 1953, Margaret Sanger and philanthropist Katherine McCormick teamed with scientist Gregory Pincus to develop a new form of contraception, the birth control pill. The hormonal method—Enovid—was approved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of menstrual disorders in 1957, 3 years before its approval for contraceptive purposes.

Contraception Use and Advice From "Dorothy"

By 1959, press coverage showed, readers had moved beyond mere discussions about birth control. Readers were using it, and they were interested in changing the societal norms and rules around birth control. In one of the first social etiquette columns to appear in our study, Dorothy Ricker told a man seeking advice about his girlfriend's "lax virtue" that she approved of "proper sex education" but felt giving "some people a 'green light' for sexual promiscuity would make ours an animal world" (Ricker, 1959, p. 6). While the column reflected traditional concerns that contraceptive information would promote promiscuity, it also acknowledged sexual activity outside of matrimony and the need for sex education and birth control. Most importantly, they indicated another important shift, that of reader engagement.

These columns indicated that readers, even men, were actively engaging with newspapers and asking questions about birth control.

Surveys also showed that half of Catholic women were reportedly using birth control. This appeared to be such common knowledge that an executive of the Congregational Christian Churches asserted that "millions of faithful Catholics who follow the teachings of the church in other matters disregard its prohibitions in the practice of contraception and do it with a clear conscience" ("[Minister Tells Catholic Role in Birth Test,](#)" 1959, p. 3). As proof, he reported that "hundreds" of Catholic women were participating in oral contraceptive experiments. According to press reports, he was correct. Hundreds of women were participating in contraception research and Dr. Pincus was recognized in the press for his role in the rapid development of the birth control pill ("[Progress on Birth Control Pill,](#)" 1959). In contrast, however, another doctor was barred from a New York Catholic hospital because of his reported association with Planned Parenthood ("[Hospital Bars Doctor Over Birth Control,](#)" 1959).

Such events, however, did not signal that the contraception debate was settled. Legal hurdles remained. Legislative efforts in 1959 to legalize birth control in Connecticut were defeated ("[Birth Control Barred,](#)" 1959), but that did not prevent New Haven, Connecticut, clergymen from asking a Superior Court to rule on the constitutionality of the state's 80-year-old ban on contraception. The clergy reportedly argued that the law "deprived them of their 'liberty, freedom of speech, and right to freely practice their religions,'" which included providing advice to married couples on the use of contraceptives ("[Clerics Would Test Birth Control Law,](#)" 1959, p. 24). Similarly, when a doctor challenged the 80-year-old law, arguing that the ban prevented him from prescribing contraceptives to patients who could lose their lives should they become pregnant, the Connecticut court unanimously upheld the ban even when the mother's life was at stake ("[Birth Control Ban Ruled Legal by Eastern Court,](#)" 1959). These stories about those using, desiring, or fighting about birth control, however, merely reflected contraception as lived experience. Religious and political groups continued to wage ideological debates over contraception, disguising them as battles over population and the presidency.

Birth Control as Savior to World Population Crisis

The issue of population growth, especially in poorer nations, was important in 1959. The American Public Health Association cautioned that the world was in peril if the population continued to increase, as did the State Department and the International Conference on Planned Parenthood. This concern was reinforced through news stories that focused on rising populations in China, Japan, India, and Pakistan. Press coverage focused on efforts by these countries to control growth through the use of birth control, and the pressure from outside nations, including the United States, to address these crises. Academic scholars also viewed world population growth as a crisis and advocated birth control as the solution. For example, noted British biologist Julian Huxley called for "international research to develop a cheap and satisfactory oral contraceptive" so the problem could be solved ("[Huxley Cites World Need of Birth Control](#)," 1959, p. 10). Other articles, editorials, and letters also supported contraception as a means to control world population growth. This support was not universal, however, as some objected to the inclusion of birth control funding in American foreign aid programs.

Most news stories focused on Catholic opposition, although other churches opposed the use of foreign aid funds to promote birth control. Journalists covered Pope John XXIII's opposition to birth control and quoted Cardinal John O'Hara saying the "campaign to impose birth control on us shows you are afraid of us and want to kill us off" ("[O'Hara Retorts on Curbs](#)," 1959, p. 39). The *New York Times* quoted the *National Catholic Monthly Magazine* arguing that birth control advocates "ignore[d] the virtue of temperance" ("[Catholic View on Birth](#)," 1959, p. 3).

Opponents gained support for their position from President Eisenhower who said, "This government will not . . . have a positive political doctrine in its program that has to do with this problem of birth control" ([Reston, 1959](#), p. 8). Presidential candidates John F. Kennedy, Hubert H. Humphrey, and Adlai E. Stevenson ("[Several Democratic Contenders Give Views on Birth Control Aid](#)," 1959) supported Eisenhower's position. Members of the public also entered the debate. One writer to the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, argued, "What this world needs is self-control and divorce control, not birth control"

(["Letters to the Times," 1959](#), p. 4B). Those opposed to the use of foreign aid to promote birth control, however, faced equally stiff opposition from those who supported the idea.

The Protestant World Council of Churches warned of a population "explosion" and the dean of Union Theological Seminary argued, "It was tragic to see Catholic leaders pressing 'a point of view on birth control which has no sound moral or religious basis, and which has been rejected by most other Christian groups'" (["Protestants Hit Fight on Birth Control," 1959](#), p. 2A). Other Protestant leaders assailed what they called Eisenhower's "surrender" to "the dogma of one church" (["Assails Ike's 'Surrender' on Birth Control," 1959](#), p. 8). Some even suggested that birth control had become "a political football" (["Episcopal Clergy Back Birth Curbs," 1959](#), p. 55). Even the General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations advocated the lifting of "all restrictions and prohibitions" against birth control (["Gaming Opposed by Reform Jews," 1959](#), p. 25) as did the governors of New York and California and the leaders of Planned Parenthood.

Birth Control, Religion, and the Presidency

During the 1959 presidential campaign season, concerns over foreign aid and birth control, as well as the role of religion in birth control policy, spilled over into the 1959 presidential campaign when the question of whether a Catholic president would answer to the Pope drew press and public attention. Polls showed that while most Americans did not object to having a Roman Catholic serve as president, many were concerned that his allegiance to his country would take a back seat to issues such as contraception ([Gallup, 1959](#)). While all the presidential candidates were drawn into the contraception debate, Kennedy drew press attention for his opposition to the use of public funds to promote birth control abroad. Kennedy drew support from presidential candidate Stevenson for his position but opposition from others, such as Governor Rockefeller of New York.

Ex-presidents, such as Harry S. Truman, were also drawn into the fray, as were Protestant ministers and members of the Jewish, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic faiths. Truman was quoted calling the debate a "false issue"; he implied that birth control was raised merely

to embarrass Kennedy ([Egan, 1959](#), p. 1). Yet, Jews and Protestants were quoted insisting that the debate raised the issue of the separation of church and state. All argued that no church had the right to impose its position on Americans or foreign countries ("[Birth Curb Held Personal Choice](#)," 1959). The question of religion, birth control, and the presidency would return in the coming decades, perhaps most heatedly in 2012, when contraception again entered presidential campaigns as a matter of religious freedom.

In sum, while legal and medical voices diminished during the 1950s, press coverage focused on voices of two other institutions: religion and politics. These bodies intersected in a debate that handled contraception not as women's health matter, but rather as a presidential and population issue. As reported in the press, discussions of birth control occurred at an institutional level, mainly among those who opposed it. The medical community having publically supported birth control in the 1940s, it apparently felt no need in 1959 again to voice its support. Also largely missing from news accounts were the voices of birth control advocates, especially women, and everyday citizens. Press coverage of future decades would show a similar pattern.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1968

The 1960s generated the most coverage of birth control, generating 705 news stories in 1968. The *New York Times* published 286 news stories, while the *Los Angeles Times* published 212 and the *Chicago Tribune* published 207. As will be shown, the 1960s was a big one for contraception history, as the decade saw great changes in all areas of American life. The 1960s was a time of turmoil and transformation. The decade opened with significant strides in the civil rights movement. As the civil rights movement gained steam, so too did the anti-war, gay rights, and second-wave feminist movements. In what has been described as a "counterculture" revolution, young people revolted against conservative ideas about authority, sex, women, and minorities. The women's movement evolved from one that focused on voting and property rights to one that focused on a broad range of issues, including workplace discrimination, sexuality, and reproductive rights. Perhaps as a complement to the counterculture movement, the FDA approved in 1960 the birth control pill for contraceptive purposes.

Often considered a symbol of the sexual revolution, the pill gave women more power in fertility planning. It entered the marketplace when attitudes toward sex and sexuality were becoming more liberal. The “free love” movement of the time championed sexual liberation, valuing physical pleasure without traditional limitations such as marriage. In 1965, in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the Supreme Court struck down a Connecticut law prohibiting contraception, legalizing its use among married couples. The Catholic Church, however, upheld its opposition to artificial birth control in Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

Tax Breaks, Contraception Questions, and Use in Daily Life

As in previous decades, a wide range of news stories about contraception showed that it was an accepted and normal part of everyday life and discourse. According to news reports, 65% of both Protestants and Catholics favored making contraception available to anyone who asked for it. This appeared to be especially true among Catholics who faced the new papal encyclical banning its use. One woman was quoted as saying, “I think it’s OK for people to use artificial birth control methods and still be good Catholics” ([Gallop, 1968](#), p. 40C).

Reporters also noted that schools and universities were establishing sex education and birth control clinics, and that advice columns such as “Dear Abby” were helping to educate women about birth control use and etiquette. Even popular culture venues were talking about birth control. For example, film critics warmly received the film, *Prudence and the Pill*, a British comedy that revolved around the pill. As the pill gained acceptance on the big screen, other contraceptives did the same in print advertisements. The *New York Times* reported, “Most of the magazines directed at women will take such ads if they are in good taste” ([Dougherty, 1968](#), p. 62). More mundane news stories reported that contraceptives impacted businesses’ hiring practices (they could not ask about contraception use) and were now part of drug stock reports and tax breaks for citizens.

The existence of birth control clinics also seemed to be taken for granted, as news stories regularly covered Planned Parenthood, including its aims and leadership. News accounts also linked birth

control clinics to a new federal mandate that required birth control services be provided to mothers receiving social benefits (e.g., welfare, Aid to Dependent Children). Not everyone welcomed these services, however, as some members of the African American community feared that birth control clinics, especially in Black neighborhoods, were really efforts at "Black genocide." Nonetheless, press accounts attested to the belief that the papal ban on birth control would "not affect family planning programs" ("[Pope's Ruling Not Affecting Agencies Here,](#)" 1968, p. 15C).

Finally, while everyone else seemed to be interested in talking about birth control, presidential candidates in 1968 were reportedly keen on *not* talking about it. One news story, for example, described Democratic candidate Edmund Muskie as "slightly flustered" when asked about the topic, while another reported that the Republican National Convention paid "scant attention" ([Broder, 1968](#), p. 5A) to the issue. Letters to the editor indicated the general public wanted to know candidates' positions. One writer, for example, insisted that "the American voter has a right to know" ([Washburn, 1986](#), p. 24). This reluctance to discuss the topic stood in stark contrast to the 1959 campaign year wherein presidential candidates seemed to be willing, even eager, to make known their position on birth control. While presidential candidates were reluctant to take on the topic, press coverage indicated that the biggest issue surrounding contraception was the papal encyclical.

Another Papal Encyclical, Another Debate

As reporters described it, Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* shattered the dreams of U.S. Catholics who had hoped he would overturn the contraception ban. This "wish" was based on the 1966 recommendation by a papal advisory committee that the Pope approve birth control use by Roman Catholic couples. The *Chicago Tribune* speculated that the Pontiff was "awaiting results of further scientific research on the development of birth control pills that may affect his decision" ("[Pope Delays Easing Birth Control Rule,](#)" 1968, p. 17B). The *Los Angeles Times*, quoting John Cardinal Heenan, reported, "Roman Catholic worshippers and churchmen in the Western world 'desperately await[ed]' guidance from the Pope" ("[West Awaiting Pope's Birth Control Advice,](#)" 1968, p. 8). After the encyclical was released,

however, the press said the Pope had "flatly reaffirmed the church's ban on mechanical and chemical contraceptives" ("[Of Human Life,](#)" [1968](#), p. 38).

Other accounts suggested that other religions, such as Anglican bishops, strongly disagreed with the Pope, as did some Catholic clergy and laity. Some Catholic physicians, psychologists, theologians, and lay Catholic group leaders rejected the encyclical and viewed it instead as something that could be used to "inform" their own consciences ([Dart, 1968](#), p. 5). The opposition to the encyclical's ban by 51 Catholic priests provoked an internal battle among Catholic clergy. Joined by Catholic University professors and 70 Roman Catholic theologians, the priests declared that couples could use their consciences to decide whether "artificial contraception" would be permissible and necessary within a marriage ([Morris, 1968](#), p. 17).

The press emphasized how the response to the encyclical triggered a church crisis. The Pontiff empathized with Catholics who could not accept his encyclical, but he scolded those who were "'becoming troublesome and harmful to the church of God' by their 'corrosive criticism' of church traditions" ("[Pope Berates Some Dissident Catholics,](#)" [1968](#), p. 22). In the face of this dissent, the Pope reportedly called on Catholic bishops to "ensure that his stand on birth control 'be maintained'" ([Fleming, 1968](#), p. 22F) acknowledging that doing so "would cause 'bitterness'" ([Shuster, 1968](#), p. 10). In particular, the archbishop of the Washington archdiocese took up the Pope's cudgel, ordering that sermons be given supporting the ban and firing or demoting the priests who opposed it ("[Pro-Pope Sermons Asked by Cardinal,](#)" [1968](#), p. 27). By the end of 1968, the Pope appeared to be reaching out to birth control supporters when he urged medical science to provide a "sufficiently secure basis for a regulation of birth founded on the observance of natural rhythms" ("[Church to Seek Surer Rhythm Birth Control,](#)" [1968](#), p. 8G).

Press coverage of the 1960s attested to continuing institutional efforts to regulate women's reproductive rights. While both Catholics and non-Catholics in the United States had long been using birth control, Pope Paul VI declared the practice sinful. His statement represented another attempt to control women's bodies under the guise of morality. Press coverage of the controversy demonstrated another

shift in contraception rhetoric, this time, to one centered on adherence to religious doctrine.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1970, 1977, and 1979

Coverage of contraception shifted from religious to medical voices in the 1970s, as birth control access and safety were debated. During the 1970s, each newspaper's coverage peaked in a different year: In 1970 for the *New York Times*, in 1977 for the *Chicago Tribune*, and in 1979 for the *Los Angeles Times*. The *New York Times* published the most articles (198) followed by the *Los Angeles Times* (136) and the *Chicago Tribune* (72) for a total of 406 news stories in the years sampled during the 1970s.

The activism of the 1960s continued into the 1970s, as anti-war, gay rights, and women's rights advocates brought their causes further into the limelight, and bringing further changes in the larger culture. As in the previous decade, birth control continued to gain acceptance in this decade. Congress overwhelmingly passed the *Family Planning Services and Population Research Act*, known as Title X, which funded family planning services, including contraception, for women who could not afford them. The landmark Supreme Court case, *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, legalized the use of contraceptives for unmarried couples in 1972, expanding on the 1965 Griswold case. People read about birth control in Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* book and listened to Loretta Lynn sing about it in her country song "The Pill." The news was not entirely positive; however, as the FDA suspended the sale of the Dalkon Shield in 1974 because of the medical harm, including severe pelvic infections, it caused thousands of women.

Contraception, Condos, Taxes, and Other Daily Life Stories

By the 1970s, contraception appeared to be linked to almost every facet of daily life from condo development, adoption, and pressures on the American family, to taxes and stock reports ([Farber, 1970](#); [Gepfert, 1979](#); "[Stocks are Down in Amex Trading](#)," 1970; [Wiedrich, 1977](#)). The condominium development, for example, was attributed to an increase in

smaller families thanks to birth control. Similarly, *Chicago Tribune* columnist [Bob Wiedrich \(1977\)](#) attributed societal ills, such as human cruelty, to the “family unit” being under

greater stress from such factors as birth control, abortion, ease of divorce, economic and peer pressures that force both parents to hold jobs, and public agencies that aid and abet the notion that one is not responsible for his actions. (p. 50)

News stories also continued to provide updates on contraception use reporting, for example, that Catholics used birth control at nearly the same rate as non-Catholics despite the 1968 encyclical's ban ([“Most Catholics Use Birth Control,” 1977](#)). Teenagers were also using contraceptives at an increasing rate, even as community leaders and politicians worried about teen pregnancy rates ([Varro, 1979](#)). Indeed, an estimated “one million American women were obtaining birth control pills illegally” in 1970 ([Lyons, 1970a](#), p. 22). Press accounts also continued to feature the sentiment that contraception was the best way to prevent abortion, and education and family planning clinics were the best way to promote contraception. While early birth control advocates, such as Margaret Sanger, had used this rationale, this was the first time the sentiment repeatedly appeared in press coverage. One possible explanation could be the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, which was accompanied by equally strong views that federal and state monies for birth control could not be used for abortions. Meanwhile, other news stories continued to feature the ongoing ideological debate.

The Encyclical Debate Continues

Press coverage throughout the 1970s continued to focus on the impact of Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical banning all forms of artificial contraception. According to press reports, Roman Catholic priests and bishops were still debating the encyclical and Catholic women were still struggling with the ban on birth control. Most news stories, however, focused on the priests or bishops who were forced to resign or were barred from teaching because of their opposition to the encyclical. Interestingly, when Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the ban on “artificial birth control” in 1979 ([Chandler, 1979a](#), p. 1), reporters asserted that just as millions of Catholics ignored the encyclical when it was first

issued, they would continue to ignore it and “rely on their own conscience” even if it conflicted with church teachings ([Kramer, 1979](#), p. 13G). News reports continued to highlight the division between the Vatican and its church members with two thirds of lay Catholics saying the church should approve some form of artificial birth control ([Chandler, 1979b](#), p. 25B).

The Catholic Church appeared to lose some earlier allies in the contraception debate, given reports that some Greek Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish leaders were generally supporting contraception use. Despite opposition to birth control by the Church of Latter Day Saints, the predominantly Mormon state of Utah was described as experiencing a declining birth rate (“[Birth Rate Declines in Utah, but is Still Twice U.S. Average,” 1979](#)) given that Mormons, too, used contraception despite their church’s ban. Press coverage of non-Catholic religions, however, was primarily “contrast” coverage; that is, the news stories merely described these religions’ positions on contraception. Unlike previous decades, the non-Catholic religions did not appear to be engaging the Catholic Church in another debate over contraception. One possible explanation for the silence about the encyclical could be the fact that the all-out debate within and among religions was over; non-Catholics remained silent quite likely because of an implicit agreement that one religion does not critique the ideology of another.

Legalizing Birth Control and Increasing Access

Legal groups were also arguing about contraception, especially in the context of a Massachusetts law that made it illegal for doctors or pharmacists to give birth control to unmarried individuals. Press accounts covered the 1970 case of William R. Baird, the clinical director for contraceptive manufacturer, who was arrested in 1967 after giving contraceptive foam to an unmarried student, literally during a Boston University lecture (“[Broad Attack on Attempts to Regulate Sex Morals,” 1970](#)). While the Comstock Act was still the law of the land, the Supreme Court opened the door to further challenges when it ruled in 1965 *Griswold v. Connecticut* that the law prohibiting married couples from using contraception violated the rights of marital privacy. In 1972 (a year not covered in our study), the Supreme Court

ruled in *Baird v. Eisenstadt* that birth control should be legal for all citizens regardless of marital status. Indeed, Baird, who was jailed eight times in five states in the 1960s for lecturing on abortion and birth control, is believed to be the only non-lawyer with three Supreme Court victories, given further decisions in 1976 and 1979. These court rulings finally legalized a practice women and men had been engaging in for centuries despite any larger institutional or ideological opposition. However, the Comstock Act remained the law and would not be ruled unconstitutional for another decade.

Birth control also gained the attention of presidents and senators. Most notably, in 1970 President Richard Nixon's budget drew press attention, in part because it allocated funding for family planning services, including birth control. Title X overwhelmingly passed with bipartisan support and authorized federal funding to be "distributed to public and nonprofit private organizations to advise persons on means of controlling birth and issuing contraceptives" ("[President Signs Birth Curb Bill,](#)" 1970, p. 1). The program included "birth control pills and other means of contraception, as well as consultations, examinations and instruction" ([Hunter, 1970](#), p. 23) and birth control research. The services did not include abortion. Perhaps as an omen of things to come, the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1979 on efforts to amend a Medicaid bill upgrading services for poor women and children by mandating parental consent before "a minor could receive birth control devices" ("[Westsidiers Split on Chrysler Vote,](#)" 1979, p. 7). The amendment lost, but the issue of minors' access to contraception would reappear in the coming decades.

The other significant event was the 1970 Senate hearings on potential harms caused by contraceptive use, especially the pill. These hearings, led by Senator Gaylord Nelson, focused on the dangers of oral contraceptives. Experts reportedly testified that the pill caused psychosis, suicidal thoughts, cancer, and other potential health hazards ([Lyons, 1970b](#), p. 28). However, Dr. Alan F. Guttmacher, president of Planned Parenthood, testified that "suspected complications from birth control pills" were secondary to the dangers associated with pregnancy ("[Expert Decries 'Alarm' on Birth-Curb Pill,](#)" 1970, p. 67). He warned that the hearings were causing "unwarranted and dangerous alarm" throughout the world. Indeed, Senator Nelson was accused of "creating so much fear about birth control pills that

100,000 unwanted 'Nelson babies' would be born" that year ("[Sen. Nelson Accused of Creating a Fear of Birth Control Pill," 1970](#), p. 22). It bears noting that the majority of voices expressing alarm over contraception "dangers" were men involved in politics. While the evidence existed of harms caused by contraception use, there was little to no discussion about what should be done to address women's birth control needs. Moreover, while there was also coverage of the latest advancements in birth control research, namely male birth control, the "morning after" pill, and natural birth control methods, women's voices were not given center stage. This is ironic given that the majority of contraception users are women.

Contraceptive Health, Hazards, and Warnings

The 1970 Senate hearings prompted a flurry of news stories about birth control health risks, package labeling, clinics, and education. Press coverage focusing on the health hazards associated with contraceptives tended to reflect the concerns expressed in the Senate hearings on birth control, for example, complications from pill use, including its impact on a fetus, the potential to bring on heart attacks, and venereal disease ("[Study Issues New Warning on Use of Pill," 1979](#), p. 2). The *Los Angeles Times* ran a story which outlined the assorted myths and facts related to various birth control methods, including oral contraceptives, IUDs, condoms, and sterilization ([Snider, 1979](#)). The Senate hearings and birth control research led to calls for further regulation of birth control. This prompted the FDA to place widely reported warnings on all packages of birth control pills in 1970 and on IUD brochures in 1977 and to assess the safety of a contraceptive shot known as Depo-Provera in 1979 ("[Inquiry Planned on Birth Control Shot," 1979](#)). Yet, despite all the angst over the safety of birth control methods, the demand for family planning services continued to grow. Journalists reported on doctors working in birth control clinics, new community birth control clinics, and fundraising efforts to support clinics. These news stories effectively served as advertising, as they always listed the services provided by the clinics. These press accounts also illustrated a site wherein lived experience (e.g., women were still demanding birth control services) met head on with efforts by political and medical groups to regulate their access. Certainly, some regulation would be needed to protect

users from harm, but again, the voices of women *as women* were largely missing from the conversation. In sum, press coverage of the 1970s provided more evidence of institutional debates about birth control. It seemed more than Senate hearings and FDA regulations would be necessary to affect women's everyday behavior.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1983, 1987, and 1989

In the 1980s, 509 news stories about contraception appeared in the years sampled. The *New York Times* published the most (228), followed by the *Los Angeles Times* (209) and the *Chicago Tribune* (75). Again, 1980s press coverage peaked in a different year for each newspaper: In 1983 for the *Chicago Tribune*, in 1987 for the *New York Times*, and in 1989 for the *Los Angeles Times*. The 3 years of coverage disclosed a strong pushback against contraception, reflecting a new social climate for those desiring or using it. The liberal social climate of the 1970s gave way to a more conservative one in the 1980s. While a number of women made history, including the first female Supreme Court justice and the first female astronaut, the women's movement experienced a backlash in this decade. In her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1992), Susan Faludi cited attempts by mainstream media and social conservatives to undermine gains made by women of previous decades. Faludi argued that advances made in women's reproductive rights prompted an "outpouring of repressed outrage" on the part of legislative, legal, and religious groups, including the press ([Faludi, 1992](#)). Nonetheless, advances in contraceptive methods continued as low-dose birth control pills were introduced, as were hormonal methods that could be injected or implanted.

Birth Control is Acceptable, But Can You Get Access?

A wide range of news stories in the 1980s continued to demonstrate that contraception was popular among women (e.g., in 1982 ten million women used the pill; [Kotulak, 1983](#)) and that it impacted all aspects of life, from business hiring practices and advertising to men's sex lives. However, despite the apparent progress made in 1970 with the passage of Title X, press coverage in the 1980s

reported pushback over who could or should have access and when. News accounts showed increasing concerns over sex education and access to contraceptive services, especially for teens. California school board members, for example, decided that birth control could be mentioned but “contraception should not be taught because it is illegal in California for minors to have sex ([“Holy War’ Erupts Over Sex in O.C. School Board Race,” 1989](#), p. 1A). Bishop Egan was quoted accusing the New York City sex education program of teaching children that “promiscuity was permissible”; he advocated teaching “decency,” “chastity,” and “Western civilization” instead ([Associated Press, 1987](#), p. 7B). Finally, a female reader accused the *Chicago Tribune* of assisting those “who would corrupt our society by denigrating our state’s efforts [to control the distribution of birth control] ([“Sex Education and Morality,” 1983](#), p. 2C).

School board members also wrestled over whether health and social services clinics, located in or near schools, should or could distribute birth control information and devices. The possible expansion of a condom distribution program in New York City high schools brought a strong endorsement from the *New York Times* ([“Girls, Babies and Schools,” 1987](#)) and an equally strong condemnation on “both moral and practical grounds” from area Catholic bishops ([Goldman, 1987](#), p. 16A). Some San Diego school board members were “offend[ed]” by the idea that birth control information might be provided in high school health clinics ([Smollar, 1989](#), p. 1A). A *Los Angeles Times* editorial argued that previous attempts to provide birth control information at school clinics had been “drowned in a sea of protests” from “narrow-minded parents” and from the Roman Catholic Church ([“The Real Issue is Students’ Health,” 1989](#), p. 2A). The editorial prompted letters to the editor condemning the *Los Angeles Times*’ position ([“Don’t Fall for Sham,” 1989](#)). Interestingly, another editorial stated,

What makes the decision tough is the opposition of a vocal minority, led by the Catholic bishop who, in a pastoral letter, called the health centers “sex clinics” in disguise that will promote free sex, contraception, masturbation and abortion. Such rhetoric is absurd. ([“Health Clinic Rhetoric,” 1989](#), p. 2B)

Even with the support of both parents and the press, some members of the school board faced stiff re-election campaigns for their pro-birth control stances ([Perlman, 1989](#)). These battles, often cloaked in concerns over morality, also showed that despite the 1970 Title X sex education mandate, opponents to contraception information and access had yet to give up their battle to prevent women, especially young women, from gaining birth control knowledge or materials.

Perhaps ironically, other news stories re-introduced the issue of eugenics, albeit indirectly. Letters to the editor and to advice columnist Ann Landers, for example, argued that women on welfare or in "underdeveloped countries" should be given contraception so they would "not be breeding like animals out of ignorance" ([Landers, 1989](#), p. 6D). News accounts also reported that "mentally retarded" American Indian women were given Depo-Provera by the Indian Health Service of the Department of Health and Human Services, despite concerns that the contraceptive caused cancer ("[Depo-Provera and the Indian Women](#)," 1987). Finally, news stories reported on the ongoing fear among the Black community that "birth control and abortion were black genocide in disguise" ([Behrens, 1989](#), p. 2A). Taken together, these stories indicated that the lived experience of contraception was again becoming more contested and more uncertain for those desiring birth control, especially for Catholics.

Yet Another Reaffirmation of Catholic Opposition

The latter part of the 1980s proved to be another contentious period for the Catholic Church; press accounts continued to demonstrate that contraception was no longer being debated as a woman's reproductive rights issue but rather as a matter of religious doctrine. According to the *New York Times*, Pope John Paul II issued the "Doctrinal Statement on Human Reproduction" in 1987, reaffirming the Church's opposition to "artificial birth control" and abortion ("[Bernardin Supports 'Radical Equality' for Women in Church](#)," 1983, p. 1A); the Pope spent the remaining part of the decade telling American Catholic laity through the press they could not cherry-pick the church teachings they would accept or ignore. He also spent 4 days with the U.S. Prelates in 1989 discussing his displeasure and lecturing bishops on the need to adhere to the ruling against "artificial birth control" and

tamp down dissent ([Montalbano, 1989](#), p. 7). The Pope found some support for his position, as indicated by "[Letters to the Editor,](#)" (1989). One writer argued, for example, that the Pope was knowledgeable of the "medical, personal, social and religious advantages natural family planning has over contraceptive techniques that have brought so many bitter harms to women" ([Lawler, 1987](#), p. 30A). Press accounts indicated, however, that while Catholic laity reportedly liked the Pope, some strongly opposed his position on contraception ([Berger, 1987](#)).

In ways that were strikingly familiar to 1968, news reports indicated that this was an inter-institutional battle because some Catholic clergy and laity opposed the Doctrinal Statement. This was especially true in the case of Father Charles Curran, who was censured by the Vatican for his views on contraception, divorce, homosexuality, and abortion, and suspended from the Catholic University of America ([Toner, 1987](#)). The *Chicago Tribune* reported that liberal Catholics were "angered" when the Pope reiterated the Church's opposition to birth control ("[Bernardin Supports 'Radical Equality' for Women in Church,](#)" 1983). While Catholics were arguing over contraception, others, including non-Catholics, were fighting over the Dalkon Shield and closing birth control clinics in California.

Lawsuits and Clinic Closings

Press accounts in 1987 and 1989 focused on how the Dalkon Shield, introduced in the 1970s, caused harm and on the victims' legal battles to gain injury compensation, bankruptcy, and reorganization plans, as well as merger issues for the manufacturer of the Shield. Of these stories, only one conveyed the personal cost of using the device ([G. Davis, 1987](#)). All other news accounts focused on the financial impact of the legal problem on the company, essentially ignoring the voice of the victim as subject and minimizing the implications for women's reproductive health.

In 1989, California Governor George Deukmejian called the state's Office of Family Planning ineffectual ([Corwin, 1989](#)) and cited abortion rates as justification for his order to cut \$24 million from the program's budget. Family planning clinics in the state of California were forced to close as a result and press accounts covered the impact of the closings on the poor and pregnant women who used them.

Deukmejian's claims also forced the remaining clinics to defend their services ("[Clinics attack family planning funding cuts,](#)" 1989). Again news stories presented the argument that the best way to prevent abortion was increased access to contraception, while others tallied the number of women who would be left without contraception and other health services ("[More Health-Care Doors Shut,](#)" 1989). These news stories reflected a cultural shift in the narrative about birth control, from one about clinics as providers of contraception to one about clinics as providers of abortions. Such rhetoric placed abortion rather than contraception at the front of the reproduction debate.

Legal and Legislative Maneuverings

As schools debated contraception access for teens and governors closed clinics, the Reagan administration proposed a new rule that would require federally funded birth control clinics to notify parents of girls under 18 when they acquired birth control prescriptions. This 1983 proposal prompted a flurry of news stories, columns, and letters to the editor in the *Chicago Tribune*. Columnists argued over whether the "squeal rule" would solve or contribute to teen pregnancy problems. Columnist [William Raspberry \(1983\)](#), for example, argued that young girls might take "chances without contraception, relying instead on advice from naïve friends," if they had to let their parents know about contraception use (p. 17). Columnist [Stephen Chapman \(1983\)](#), on the other hand, argued that contraception facilitated "what some people call sexual liberation and others call promiscuity" (p. 6A). Efforts at the state and federal levels to force birth control clinics to inform parents about minors seeking contraception were unsuccessful, however. In fact, they were so unsuccessful that by the end of 1983, the Reagan administration ended its efforts to make the "squeal rule" the law of the land.

Other press accounts reported that the U.S. Supreme Court issued several rulings impacting reproductive rights, including *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* in 1989, wherein the right to contraception and to "procreational choice" were part of the Court's deliberations. Similarly, *Bolger v. Youngs Drug Products Corp.* reportedly tested the 1865 law prohibiting the use of U.S. mails to ship "unsolicited contraceptive or contraceptive advertisement[s]" to non-

medical personnel ([Tybor, 1983](#), p. 10B), and *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* confirmed the right of school officials to control what was published in school newspapers, including stories about birth control ([Hechinger, 1987](#)). The 1987 nomination of Judge Robert Bork to the Supreme Court, however, drew the most press attention.

The *New York Times* covered Bork's nomination and his subsequent Senate confirmation hearing, and heavily scrutinized his legal decisions and commentaries. All news stories, columns, and letters to the editor mentioned Bork's criticism of the 1965 *Griswold v. Connecticut* decision that held unconstitutional a Connecticut law forbidding contraceptive use or sale. Newspaper stories emphasized that Bork did not view state regulation of marital sexual relations as problematic, nor did he believe the Constitution guaranteed the right to privacy, a key component in the *Griswold* case ([A. M. Rosenthal, 1987](#)). Editorials and news articles clearly indicated that the newspaper did not support Bork, nor did most letters to the editor. In fact, we found only one letter advocating Bork's nomination, calling the newspaper's characterization of his testimony "shocking" ("[Say Yes for Justice,](#)" 1987, p. 38A). In stark contrast, the *New York Times* devoted little attention to Judge Anthony M. Kennedy's 1987 Supreme Court nomination, which drew neither an editorial nor a letter to the editor about his birth control position.

In sum, 1980s press coverage of contraception revealed another decade of heated debate. In the spirit of the conservative social climate, many governmental and cultural moralists voiced strong opposition to birth control, this time in the name of Church ideology, Supreme Court nominations, and school health clinics, among other issues peripherally related to contraception. Again missing from the debate were the individuals who sought and used birth control themselves.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 1991, 1992, and 1994

The last decade of the 20th century was marked by technological, political, and cultural change. The decade saw the beginning of third-wave feminism, wherein many of the initiatives and

advances of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s were contested. Most notably, third-wave feminists stressed the diversity of women's lives and their experiences, and argued that now that they had achieved many of the legal and institutional goals of the second-wave movement, it was time to move toward more nuanced, less artificial of representations of women. As women were renegotiating feminism, they were also being given more birth control options including Norplant, Depo-Provera, female condoms, and Plan B emergency contraception, most of which were not covered by health insurance plans. Men, meanwhile, were receiving help for erectile dysfunction with Viagra, a product that health insurance companies would cover. In the 1990s, 417 news stories were published in the three sampled years. For the *Los Angeles Times*, the peak year was 1991 (139 stories), the *New York Times* in 1992 (78), and the *Chicago Tribune* in 1994 (200). Press coverage of these years showed that contraception was debated in the courts, church, and government.

Everyone is Arguing About Contraception—Again

As in decades past, press coverage of contraception showed that birth control entered into many areas of 1990s life, from popular culture representations to conversations about teenagers' sex lives to rape trials. Birth control references could be found on soap operas like *Days of Our Lives* as well as afterschool specials and sitcoms like *Rosanne*. Books also discussed contraception in the sex lives of Catholics, Black women's reproductive health, and abortion rights. Richard J. Herrnstein's book, *The Bell Curve*, even linked a woman's reproductive decisions to her intelligence, arguing that a smart woman "deliberately decides to have a child and calculates the best time to do it" ([Madigan, 1994](#), p. 1), while a less intelligent woman is less likely to practice birth control at all. These discussions of media representations of birth control, however, only hinted at the debate occurring elsewhere.

Teenage sex lives, birth control and the poor, and community sex education drew press attention. News stories reported that birth control was widely used by 1990s teens, "contrary to perceptions" that most did not use contraceptives ("[Sexually Active Girls Cite Coercion](#)," [1994](#), p. 17). According to press accounts, debates nonetheless

continued over the appropriate age for sex education and whether parents should be notified of teachers' lectures on sex and birth control. Supporters of school-sponsored clinics stressed their importance for teens at risk for pregnancy and AIDS, and advocated for condom machines in student restrooms. Opponents to school health clinics reportedly feared the clinics *might* "end up distributing birth control devices and making abortion referrals" ([Hernandez, 1991](#), p. 3B). These debates over contraception access and information, however, were not limited to those actually involved in schools.

Letters to the editor also reflected both sides of the debate. Many advocated birth control as a means to reduce abortion. For example, a writer to the *Chicago Tribune* said, "Let's champion birth control, safer sex, men accepting responsibility, better childcare options—not a way for 'children' to get convenient abortions" ([Brick, 1994](#), p. 2). Opponents, on the other hand, alleged that birth control education contributed to teenage pregnancy and caused social harm. One woman writer to the *Los Angeles Times* argued that "the whole idea that teaching about contraception will help cut down on unwanted pregnancy is false" ([Armstrong, 1991](#), p. 8J). Another worried that teenagers were being "bombarded with advertising and communication on abortion, condoms and soon the proposed contraceptive device Norplant" ("[Letters to the Editor,](#)" 1991, p. 6B). Ironically, debate over using contraceptives such as the hormonal implant Norplant (which requires a physician to surgically insert six capsules into a woman's upper arm and reportedly prevents pregnancy for 5 years) to solve social problems would occur again, this time in courts of law and state government ("[Norplant Devices for Birth Control Safe, F.D.A. Says,](#)" 1995).

Finally, press accounts disclosed that a woman's contraception use could be used against her in a court of law, even when she was a victim of sexual assault. This was the case in the Glen Ridge, New Jersey rape trial of 1992 of four high school football players who sexually assaulted a mentally disabled classmate 3 years prior. The *New York Times* noted that defense lawyers argued that the victim was an "aggressive temptress" ([Fritsch, 1992](#), p. 8B) and cited her use of birth control pills as evidence of her promiscuity. It bears noting that the taking a young woman's birth control use as evidence of her promiscuity reflected Victorian era beliefs that only prostitutes used

contraception. Radio commentator and personality Rush Limbaugh would reiterate this position in 2012 in the debate over insurance coverage for contraception.

The Norplant Debates

In 1991, the *Los Angeles Times* focused primarily on court-ordered contraception and legislative efforts to use contraception to regulate women's bodies. California Judge Howard Broadman reportedly ordered Norplant implanted into an African American mother convicted of beating her daughters as a condition of her probation. Editorials in the newspaper noted the racial and class implications of the decision and argued that such "charges [would] always arise when a poor black woman [was] ordered by a court not to reproduce" ("[When a Mother Beats her Children,](#)" 1991, p. 12B).

Broadman, however, was not the only official to propose the use of Norplant to solve social problems. California Governor Pete Wilson was also quoted proposing to make Norplant widely available to teenagers and drug abusers of childbearing age, overturning the birth control policies of his predecessor, George Deukmejian. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Wilson's plan "struck a responsive chord with most Californians" ([Skelton & Weintraub, 1991](#), p. 1A). Yet, press accounts also reported concerns that the recommendations by Broadman and Wilson reflected an ongoing effort by politicians and judges to use contraception as a means of regulating women's bodies, this time without the guise of eugenics.

Religion, Politics, and Population at the Cairo Conference

The political, religious, and social battles over contraception and women's bodies merged during the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo, Egypt. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that while the slated topics were population and development, the issues of birth control, abortion, and religion were of particular significance to the participating delegates. The Chicago paper even suggested the conference title was a misnomer: "What is being debated is not science. It is religion, politics

and sex" ([Margolis, 1994](#), p. 11). News articles about the conference, taken together, conveyed a similar sentiment, as Catholic leaders reportedly waged a campaign to influence the conference even before it began. Roman Catholic cardinals, for example, urged nations to oppose any effort to promote abortion and birth control ("[Vatican Opposes Population Control](#)," 1994). Meanwhile, Pope John Paul II made the conference "one of the most relentless battles of his papacy" ("[Vatican Attacks US, UN over Population](#)," 1994, p. 1).

According to [Georgie Anne Geyer \(1994\)](#) of the *Chicago Tribune*, Pope John Paul II "sent respected Vatican emissaries to regimes like those of Iran and Libya for support in his own anti-Cairo stands against not only abortion but against any form of contraception" (p. 3). Political columnist Katha Pollitt criticized the Pope's treatment of women:

Where women are concerned, the Pope apparently feels less kinship with the vast majority of Catholics around the world . . . than he does with the mullahs and imams whose notion of family values include polygyny, the legal right of men to murder "unchaste" female relatives and so forth. ([Pollitt, 1994](#), p. 4)

Press coverage of presidential politics in the 1990s showed similar efforts to regulate women's bodies.

Birth Control and Presidential Politics

As in 1959 and 1968, the issue of birth control impacted presidential politics, especially for President George H. W. Bush who was seeking re-election in 1992. The *Los Angeles Times*, in particular, offered commentary about President Bush's changing stance on birth control ([Kostmayer, 1991](#)). The newspaper compared the President to his father, Prescott Bush, a Connecticut senator who—like his son—reportedly "started his political career as a leading proponent of birth control" ("[Letters to the Times](#)," 1991, p. 10B). Similarly, the *New York Times* noted Bush's efforts to distance himself from the "advocates of the liberal agenda" who wanted "public schools to hand out birth control pills and devices to teenage kids" ([A. Rosenthal,](#)

[1992](#), p. 20A). To reinforce this anti-contraception position, the Bush administration, in what would be the last year of its presidency, removed birth control information from a childrearing book for federal workers. The deletion was reportedly consistent with earlier actions, including a decision “to cancel a study of teenage behavior and attitudes because it included questions about contraception and sexual behavior” ([Hilts, 1992](#), p. 1). By eliminating contraceptive information and promoting ignorance of sexual behavior, the Bush administration effectively turned contraception into a political matter.

In sum, during the 1990s, population issues, court cases, and presidential politics were conduits for attacking and defending contraception programs. As in previous decades, newspapers covered birth control mainly in the context of secondary issues, avoiding a frank discussion of contraception as a women’s health issue. This trend would continue until the end of our study: In the early 21st century, discussions of contraception would be shrouded in debates about religious freedom, politics, and morality.

Press Coverage of Contraception, 2012

The beginning of the 21st century saw new efforts to turn back women’s reproductive rights. The George W. Bush administration sought to eliminate contraception coverage for federal employees, cut family planning funding, promoted abstinence-only education programs, and supported pharmacists who refused to dispense contraception on moral or religious grounds. These actions, however, failed to generate the same level of anger over birth control as did the *Affordable Care Act* (ACA) of 2010. The ACA was the defining act of the country’s first African American President, Barack Obama, who took office in 2009. The ACA’s intent was to improve America’s health care system through reforms to the health insurance system. Under the ACA’s contraception mandate, health insurance plans were required to cover contraceptive costs without patient co-pays. The contraception mandate was at the crux of the 2012 birth control debate, as political and religious groups charged that the battle was not about women’s reproductive rights but rather religious freedom.

In 2012, the three newspapers collectively published 489 news stories about contraception: The *New York Times* published 244, the

Chicago Tribune published 181, and the *Los Angeles Times* published 64. The 2012 press accounts reported that the 140-year debate over contraception remained heated as political, religious, business, and legislative bodies continued to argue about this key health issue. Press coverage of contraception by the three newspapers clearly showed that the “country was in an uproar about contraception” ([Abcarian, 2012b](#), p. 10A). According to [Abcarian \(2012b\)](#), this uproar occurred every 4 years when presidential elections “turn[ed] up the heat on long-simmering tensions” (p. 10A), referring to tensions that surfaced during the 1960s.

As in previous decades, birth control did not appear in the press only when “hot button” issues emerged within the larger culture. There were also familiar news stories about the history of birth control, birth control and homelessness, teen use of contraception and the decline in teenage pregnancy, sex education within schools, and programs to distribute birth control services, as well as health and contraceptive method use, contraceptive research, birth control risks, and sex education. Contraception was also mentioned in popular culture venues such as films, books, plays and radio programs, and in advice columns focusing on sexual relationships, parenting issues, and contraception use by children.

One event that drew some press attention was the Komen Foundation’s plan to cut its funding to Planned Parenthood. The charity’s proposed actions provoked an uproar, especially among women, who complained to reporters that Planned Parenthood’s health and family planning services were vital to cancer prevention. The president of the Foundation was eventually forced to resign and the funding to Planned Parenthood was restored. Most of the press coverage in 2012, however, focused on institutional responses to the ACA’s contraception mandate or the presidential election.

Response to the ACA Contraception Mandate

The ACA’s contraception mandate battle began in 2011 when it was reported that the law required all employers—except “religious employers”—to provide employees with contraception coverage at no additional cost ([Parsons & Hennessey, 2012b](#), p. 1). Contraception coverage was reportedly “standard for most health plans” and press

accounts indicated it helped reduce “overall costs by preventing unwanted pregnancies” ([Levey, 2012](#), p. 6). Opposition to the Obama administration’s mandate came from business, legislative, religious, and public arenas.

While a majority of lay Catholics reportedly “favored the new contraceptive rule,” the strongest opposition came from Catholic leadership; Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians also reportedly objected to the provision and vowed to fight the requirement ([Brachear, 2012](#), p. 1). According to press accounts, the Obama administration tried to end the controversy with an “accommodation” whereby employees would be “offered free birth control” directly from insurers ([Parsons & Hennessey, 2012a](#), p. 1). This approach, the administration argued, would “guarantee women access to contraceptives ‘while accommodating religious liberty interests’” ([Pear, 2012](#), p. 14A). The Obama administration’s efforts to justify the mandate and to appease objectors, however, were unsuccessful.

In ways strikingly reminiscent of previous decades, Catholic religious leaders reportedly pledged to fight the “contraception mandate”; Cardinal Timothy Dolan argued, “[I]t is not about contraception, it is not about women’s health [It is a freedom of religion battle” ([Stelloh & Newman, 2012](#), p. 22A). According to press accounts, 43 Roman Catholic institutions sued the federal government over the contraception mandate, while other clergy reminded their parishioners that they should allow Catholic teaching on social issues, including contraception, to guide their presidential election votes. Reflecting none of the divisions seen in 1968 and 1979 press accounts, Catholic clergy appeared unified in condemning contraception, “equating some forms of it with abortion” and advised Catholic laity that the only acceptable forms of birth control were abstinence and “natural family planning” ([Oppenheimer, 2012](#), p. 17A). The Catholic Church’s actions led to charges that it was becoming too involved in politics and aligning itself with the Republican Party. Ironically, even Catholics who disagreed with the Church’s contraception ban reportedly sided with the bishops on the grounds that the mandate “encroached upon the church’s legitimate prerogatives” to ensure its employment practices reflected its moral values ([Allen, 2012](#), p. 25A). The press left largely unquestioned the position that the battle turned on religious freedom, not a woman’s right to access contraception.

News stories noted how the ACA contraception mandate battle spilled over into state politics. The state attorneys general of Florida, Michigan, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas, for example, all asked a federal court to block the contraception mandate. While the states were unsuccessful in blocking the mandate, some states continued to work to bypass the requirement. New Hampshire and Missouri, for example, passed bills exempting religious employers from having to provide contraception coverage to their employees ([Bidgood, 2012](#)). Other states, such as Texas, simply tried to limit contraception access by excluding Planned Parenthood from a state health care program for poor women ([Ramshaw & Belluck, 2012](#)). Most press coverage, however, focused on Republican Party efforts to overturn the ACA and its contraceptive mandate.

Calling the contraception mandate another example of "government overreach," members of the Republican Party reportedly vowed to amend the requirement to allow for religious exemptions. Press accounts showed that various rationales were offered for their position. Senator Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, for example, declared the battle necessary because it was a "religious liberty issue," "not a women's rights issue" ([Steinhauer, 2012a](#), p. 1A). A supporter of presidential candidate Rick Santorum suggested that the mandate was unnecessary because contraception "was as simple as women putting an aspirin between their knees" ([Mascaro, 2012](#), p. 7A), and Senate candidate Todd Akin asserted that "a woman's body was able to prevent a pregnancy resulting from 'legitimate rape'" ([Steinhauer, 2012b](#), p. 1A).

Representative Darrell Issa of California convened congressional hearings on "religious freedom" and the contraception mandate ("[Issa's Political Theater](#)," 2013, p. 29A). The hearings "ignited a firestorm of protest" even before they were held because the first two panels were comprised entirely of men ([Mascaro, 2012](#), p. 7). Hoping to quell the uproar, Issa held additional hearings that allowed testimonies from contraception advocates such as Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University law student. Newspapers covered how conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh used her testimony to call Fluke a "slut" and a "prostitute," and how Limbaugh argued that birth control was an excuse for women to engage in promiscuity and "sex for hire" ([Daum, 2012](#), p. 21). All three newspapers published

editorials and op-ed pieces criticizing Limbaugh and condemning his treatment of Fluke. Taken together, these incidents fueled the idea that the Republican Party was engaged in a “war on women.” Democrats reportedly saw political opportunity in the Republican opposition and argued the battle was doing “lasting damage to the Republican Party” ([Steinhauer & Cooper, 2012](#), p. 12A).

The ACA contraception mandate also exposed a nation and a press that were divided over birth control. Op-Ed columns, editorials, and letters to the editor in the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* largely supported the contraception mandate. *New York Times* columnist [Nicholas Kristof \(2012\)](#), for example, argued that our “national priority must be the female half of the population” (p. 11). *New York Times* columnist [Ross Douthat \(2012\)](#), however, argued that contraception regulations were a “particularly cruel betrayal of Catholic Democrats” who advocated for the ACA on the grounds of social justice (p. 12). The *Los Angeles Times* editorials called the Obama’s administration’s willingness to fight for the contraception mandate “good news for women and for the health of the nation” (“[In Defense of Family Planning,](#)” 2012, p. 21A). Perhaps not surprisingly, letters to the editor in both newspapers also supported the mandate, with both men and women largely holding the view that birth control use should be based on personal beliefs, not employers’ beliefs.

The editorials, op-ed columns, and letters to the editor in the *Chicago Tribune*, however, largely opposed the contraception mandate. While columnists Mary Schmich and Eric Zorn supported the mandate, especially after the Obama administration’s “accommodation,” most columnists argued that the debate was “about religious freedom, not birth control.” One *Tribune* editorial argued that the “war on women” was a political ploy to get the citizenry to pay for women’s contraception (“[Obama No Healer of Our Nation’s Angst,](#)” 2012, p. 17); another argued that “Catholic institutions are under siege by the federal government” and were being forced to provide contraceptives, “including in some cases abortifacient drugs” (“[Politics and the Cost of Conscience,](#)” 2012, p. 14). Writers to the *Tribune* appeared to follow suit, arguing that they were being “forced to either abandon” their beliefs or be “fined a ‘tax’” (“[Local Voices,](#)” 2012, p. 4).

For the first time in decades, press accounts reflected an effort to increase women's access to contraception, yet they also indicated a concerted effort by political and religious institutions to thwart any progress. Once again women's voices were rarely heard as subject. When they were heard, as in the case of Sandra Fluke, news stories reported that some, including Limbaugh, sometimes vilified them.

Birth Control Politics and Presidential Elections

Women, contraception, and reproductive rights issues also surfaced during the 2012 presidential campaign. Press coverage focused primarily on Republican presidential candidates who attacked the contraception mandate and the ACA as examples of government overreach and intrusions into religious freedom. Newt Gingrich, for example, labeled the mandate "the most outrageous assault on religious liberty in American history" ([Mascaro & Hennessey, 2012](#), p. 7A), and Mitt Romney charged President Obama with mandating that religiously affiliated hospitals provide free contraceptives, which he called "abortive pills" ([Stolberg, 2012](#), p. 1A). The GOP candidate who drew the most press attention, however, was Rick Santorum. Santorum strongly opposed contraception, even for married couples, and reportedly argued that supporters of contraception and abortion, as well as gay marriage, were "radical feminists [who] succeeded in undermining the traditional family . . ." ([Abcarian, 2012c](#), p. 13).

The debate over contraception eventually progressed to one between GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney and President Obama, running for a second term. Obama argued that Republicans were trying to turn back the clock and take women back "to the policies more suited to the 1950s than to the 21st century" ([Calmes, 2012](#), p. 15A). During a campaign debate, Romney countered this claim by asserting, "Every woman should have access to contraception" ("[Obama Shows Fire While Romney Offers Hope, Change,](#)" 2012, p. 17). Press accounts, however, indicated that Romney's position on contraception and abortion often shifted. At different times, Romney viewed "abortion as a form of contraception" ([Parsons & Mehta, 2012](#), p. 1), touted contraception as every woman's right, and advocated allowing employers to deny birth control coverage to workers ([West & Mehta, 2012](#)). Press accounts indicated

that Obama benefited from such shifts. Romney later claimed that Obama won the election because he gave women voters "gifts" like free contraception coverage ([Reston, 2012](#), p. 1A).

The Voters

The 2012 press coverage also focused on voters, especially women, who were portrayed as being "particularly susceptible to Obama's relentless efforts to paint Romney as a hard-liner not only on abortion but on access to contraception" ([McManus, 2012](#), p. 34A). Indeed, some women voters reportedly endorsed the view that Republicans were attacking women. One voter, for example, was quoted as saying, "I'm 62 years old, and I'm thinking, 'My God, we're going back to when my mother was little,' having a public argument about birth control" ([Lauter, 2012](#), p. 13). Most letters to the editor seemed to endorse this viewpoint but not all endorsed the claim that women's reproductive rights were under attack. One writer to the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, argued, "To think even a handful of women would let their vote be bought for the promise of birth control is beyond belief" ("[Voice of the People](#)," 2012, p. 25).

Finally, Catholic voters were singled out as being especially concerned about the contraception debate in 2012. The *Los Angeles Times* described some Catholic voters in Ohio as "enraged" about Obama's position on abortion and the contraception mandate ([Semuels, 2012](#), p. 15A). Other Catholic voters, however, supported Obama despite these limitations and were described as having ignored the "church's official position on contraception for many years, often with the blessing of low-level clerics" ([Bruni, 2012](#), p. 27A).

In sum, larger ideological battles were still fought over the right to access and use contraception. The narrative showed that systematic efforts by religious bodies, especially the Catholic Church, and legislative and political institutions to control women's bodies and reproductive health were ongoing. These efforts, however, were not explicit but disguised behind such smokescreens as religious freedom and battles over government overreach.

Conclusion

On June 22, 2015, the *New York Times* opined, "One would imagine that congressional Republicans, almost all of whom are on record as adamantly opposing abortion, would be eager to fund programs that reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies" ("[Republicans Take Aim at Poor Women,](#)" 2015, p. 16A). Yet, the editorial noted, they want to cut federal funding to Title X, which has provided contraceptive and other health services to poor and rural women for 55 years. Perhaps this is predictable, given political pundits such as Fox News' Glenn Beck who consistently promote the idea that Planned Parenthood is primarily an abortion provider and that Margaret Sanger is "one of the most horrible women in American history" ("[The Glenn Beck Show,](#)" 2010).

Over 140 years after the passage of the Comstock Act, those who desire contraception access and information are denied it, especially if they are poor or live outside of major metropolitan areas. Indeed, while American women in 2015 have far more personal, political, and social power than they did in 1873, they still have limited say about their reproductive rights and their access to reproductive health care. Press coverage of the never-ending contraception debate shows that women's reproductive rights can be debated, repealed, limited, talked about, campaigned about, and controlled—but they're not a natural right. Women continue to occupy a position within the larger culture that is structurally subordinate to men.

The goal of this study was to understand the 140-year-old press narrative about contraception, the women and men who sought and used it, and those who tried to control their ability to do so. The *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Times* coverage of contraception between 1873 and 2013 shows that women's reproductive rights and bodies are negotiable and that it is religious, medical, legislative, and legal institutions which are doing the negotiations, not the women who must live their lives. Nonetheless, press coverage of key moments in contraception history showed that contraception has always been an important part of men and women's everyday experience. A wide range of news stories regularly reported that birth control was commonly practiced, especially among those who could afford it, and that they were talking about it. Perhaps more importantly, press coverage also showed that men and women tried to access birth control, often successfully, even when it was illegal or

opposed by religious institutions, as it was for most of the period under study. People wanted to talk about it so they attended public meetings on birth control by the thousands between 1873 and 1940, and sent a steady stream of letters to the editors of the three newspapers over the 140-year period. In other words, the lived experience of the men and women who desired birth control was one of use and dissemination regardless of what the larger ideological and institutional structures mandated.

The narrative that dominated the press coverage showed ongoing, systematic efforts by religious, medical, legislative, and legal institutions to regulate women's bodies. Indeed, these institutions have contested the topic for more than a century, but rarely as matter of women's health. Instead they have attached birth control to tangential issues including eugenics, population control, physician rights, religious freedom, and abortion, all of which serve as rhetorical smokescreens. It bears noting that while the language of eugenics largely disappeared from press coverage of birth control after World War II, news accounts continued to reflect an effort to use contraception to control society's "undesirables" (e.g., the mentally disabled and Native Americans). Press accounts also reported that only the Catholic Church remained consistent in its opposition and rhetoric regarding artificial birth control. All others appeared to search for rationales justifying their support or opposition to birth control (e.g., it was good for population control or promoted promiscuity) while never directly acknowledging they were the ones who would determine whether women could control the number of children they would bear. In short, despite the widespread acceptance and practice of birth control throughout time and across cultures, the issue continues to direct (and misdirect) conversations about the boundaries of women's reproductive freedom. Even as women use and talk about birth control as common practice, the larger ideological debate has been one that has excluded women.

Press coverage of key moments in contraception history occasionally—but rarely—added women's voices to the narrative. Birth control advocates, such as Margaret Sanger, enjoyed a lot of press attention during the first half of the 20th century but advocates' voices became less common after 1940. Most press accounts cited female politicians or leaders of Planned Parenthood as representatives of

women. Women who spoke as subjects, however, were rare. Teenagers who were pregnant or who struggled with birth control were cited far more frequently than adult women whose lives were impacted by medically hazardous birth control or closed family planning clinics. This was especially true for poor women, who were more often than not described as ignorant, unable to control themselves, and lazy in their contraceptive use. Press coverage appeared to damn them for the number of children they had even as it announced further limitations on their ability to access birth control.

In closing, we must ask whether this press coverage indicates the backlash against women that Faludi and others identified. Are the religious, medical, legal, and legislative efforts to limit contraception access for women merely responses to women moving into the public sphere during the Progressive Era, to the various waves of feminism, and to women's advancement in the workplace? Possibly. But we believe that the larger institutional and ideological battle over contraception has been more systemic and ingrained. Press accounts show a cultural shift, from one where contraception was predominately viewed as a practice of prostitutes (despite evidence to the contrary) to a lived experience where birth control is as much a part of everyday life as brushing teeth. What has not significantly changed over the 140-year period are the larger cultural and ideological structures which continue to be dominated by men, who may signal that they too have progressed into the 21st century, but have not, in the end, changed their position or lost their power to determine the fate of women's bodies.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the outstanding support provided by research assistants Teresa Soley, Edgar Martinez, Allysa Michaelson, and Courtney Powers who helped collect and catalog the thousands of articles used in this study. A special thanks to the anonymous reviewers and to former editor Paul Martin Lester.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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