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The Never-ending Struggle: US Press Coverage of Contraception 2000–2013

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Abstract

In 1873, the Comstock Act labeled contraceptive information and materials obscene and banned their distribution. The issue divided the United States then, and it divides the nation today. This essay examines 2000–2013 press coverage of contraception in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, two newspapers that have covered contraception since 1873. Press coverage reveals that contemporary efforts to regulate women's bodies are cloaked in discussions about the *Affordable Care Act*, religious freedom, morality, and employer rights. Accepting the ideology that contraception is no longer a reproductive rights issue allowed the press to exclude women from the debate. In doing so, the power of political, social, and religious groups to control the contraception narrative and women's lives is confirmed. The lived experience of women has evolved from 1873

when press coverage at least gave women a platform to speak about contraception. By 2013, this power appears to be lost.

Keywords

Affordable Care Act, birth control, Comstock Act, contraception, news

Introduction

[T]he question before us is not whether she shall practice birth control, which is already common, but whether it shall be legitimate to do so, entirely respectable and decent ... (Whitaker, 1917)

Birth control is a topic and practice that has generated considerable attention from the US press and divided the country for well over a century. The debate over contraception, much like the often-deadly struggle over abortion, is part of a larger debate over women's right to control their bodies, a central concern of the modern women's movement. This essay examines press coverage of contraception over the last 13 years, 2000–2013, in two legacy American newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The goal is to understand the larger cultural narrative told about contraception and the women and men who battle over its use in the United States. As will be shown, this narrative masks an ongoing effort to turn back the clock on women's reproductive rights, especially those of women using birth control. Legislative, judicial, political, and religious efforts to regulate women's bodies have continued well into the 21st century. These efforts are cloaked in discussions about the *Affordable Care Act* (ACA), religious freedom, morality, and employer rights. Furthermore, while most contraceptive products are primarily designed for women's use, women's voices are rarely heard in the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* press coverage. The end result is a cultural narrative about contraception that privileges powerful, predominantly male voices and excludes women whose lives and bodies are directly affected.

An examination of contemporary press coverage of contraception is important for three reasons. First, it contributes to our understanding of how the press orients us to our communities and creates a sense of commonality and cultural history (Bird and Dardenne, 1997), especially as it relates to contraception. It demonstrates the gendering of news, which is typically masculine in tone and focus as indicated by the topics, authors, and sources that predominate the front sections of newspapers (Carter and Steiner, 2004; Poindexter et al., 2008; Rakow and Kranich, 1991). Furthermore, news stories, editorials, and even letters to the editor re-affirm the social order (Gans, 1980) as part of a larger symbolic system that 'act[s] both as a model of and as a model for a culture' (Geertz, 1973). Told across time and space, these narratives become part of our collective memory (Kitch, 2002; Zelizer, 1992).

It bears noting that while newspapers have historically worked to attract women readers, primarily to encourage consumption and meet advertisers' needs, newspaper content and stories targeting women have been relegated to women's pages or the back of the newspaper (Harp, 2007). Issues directly affecting women, such as the feminist movement or contraception, have received 'second-tier' treatment (Poindexter et al., 2008) or have been ridiculed, dismissed, or ignored by the press (Faludi, 1992; Rakow and Wackwitz, 2004). While women rarely appear as newsmakers or sources, they commonly appear in 'ritualized roles' as signs; they convey meaning rather than generate it (Rakow and Kranich, 1991: 15). That is, when women do appear, they seldom 'speak as subjects' for themselves but rather for institutions and organizations (Poindexter et al., 2008; Rakow and Kranich, 1991: 17). Analysis of 2000–2013 contraception press coverage, therefore, contributes to our understanding and memory about what it means to be a woman seeking to regulate fertility and childbearing and whether she has 'full and equal participation' in the debate over her reproductive rights (Rakow and Wackwitz, 2004: 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. According to Williams (1977), a structure of feeling captures the struggle between ideology and lived experience within a culture by incorporating 'meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt' (p. 132). To capture structures of feeling during a particular period, Williams advocated examining material culture such as newspapers, art, and literature, which often include 'elements of social and material experience' (1977: 133; see also Brennen, 2008). Williams' observations, made half a century ago, remind us that representations of the lived experience are not universal. 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). Some groups, such as women or the poor, may be denied the opportunity or the means of participation in the creation of mediated texts or their meaning (Poindexter et al., 2008; Rakow and Kranich, 1991). In short, the 'production of cultural artifacts is a political activity' – one that seldom involves citizens representing themselves as citizens but instead privileges those in positions of power (Rakow and Wackwitz, 2004: 177). An examination of the contemporary structures of feeling provides insight into how the press aligned the contraceptive narrative and the voices within it.

Finally, this study contributes to research on birth control, in general, and contraception, in particular, by exploring how two flagship newspapers have covered the issue over the past 13 years. While there have been numerous studies on birth control (Baer, 2002; Brodie, 1994; Engelman, 2011; Gordon, 1990; Hajo, 2010; Joffe, 1986; Reed, 1978; Tone, 1997) and on activists like Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger (Bone, 2010; Buerkle, 2009; Lumsden, 2007; Rogness and Foust, 2011), there have been relatively few studies of press coverage of contraception (Bone, 2010; Endres, 1968; Faludi, 1992; Flamiano, 1998; Garner, 2014; Kruvand, 2012).

Bone (2010) examined the rhetorical strategies Margaret Sanger used in the *New York Call*, *The Woman Rebel*, and *Family Limitation* to break down objections to contraception. Endres (1968) found that physicians and pharmaceutical companies targeted affluent women in 1860–1880 advertisements of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Faludi (1992) argued that gains in women's reproductive freedoms were met with an 'outpouring of repressive outrage' by a wide range of legislative, legal, and clerical groups, including the press, but that the views of affected women were rarely explored (p. 414). Flamiano (1998) determined that birth control news stories in the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, and *Harper's Weekly*, between 1915 and 1917, emphasized family planning, religious views on contraception, the public morals of women, and 'race suicide'. Kruvand (2012) found that news sources and frames shifted dramatically in the *New York Times* coverage of 'The Pill' between 1960 and 2010, yet concerns about the safety and morality of contraception remained fairly constant. Finally, Garner (2014) discovered two narratives in 1873–1917 coverage of contraception by the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*: the former focused on the battle between Comstock Act supporters and opponents, whereas the latter portrayed the contraception debate as a battle of ideas. This study extends this scholarship by examining the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* 2000–2013 press coverage of contraception.

Methodology

The period under examination begins on 1 January 2000 and continues until 31 October 2013 and covers the terms of two presidents, George W Bush and Barack H Obama. Both worked to change the contraception landscape for women; Bush tried to restrict access, Obama tried to expand it. The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* were selected because both are flagship newspapers with publication histories dating back to the 1873 passage of the Comstock Act. They also represent two different regions of the United States. Today, both newspapers are generally regarded as liberal, but both were viewed as conservative and self-identified as Republican publications between 1873 and 1917 (Davis, 1921; Hart, 1975). Additionally, this work is part of a larger study examining the two papers' coverage of contraception since 1873 (Garner, 2014). The purpose is to

understand the larger cultural narrative told about contraception and those who battle over its use in the United States. To capture the lived experience of those involved in the contraception debate, news stories, editorials, and letters to the editor were obtained through online-database searches using the key words: contraception and birth control. Because contraception was the focus, accounts that centered on abortion were excluded.

A total of 260 news stories, editorials, and letters to the editor appeared between 2000 and 2013. The *New York Times* carried 135 and the *Los Angeles Times* printed 125. There were two particularly heavy periods of press coverage. The first was 2000–2002, during the early years of the Bush administration, when the *New York Times* printed a total of 36 articles, editorials, and letters on contraception, and the *Los Angeles Times* published 16. The second burst of contraception coverage was 2011–2013, after the passage of the ACA. During this second period, the *Los Angeles Times* printed 74 stories, editorials, and letters, and the *New York Times* published 87.

The study utilized a critical literary method of textual analysis, which allows an examination of press coverage of a topic within its larger social and political context (Du Gay et al., 1997), including how ‘the press interprets [the] process of social change’ (Hall, 1975: 11). As noted by Stuart Hall (1975), the technique requires the researcher to dive below the surface or denotative meaning of a text into its ‘latent meanings’ and to preserve the story’s ‘complexity of language and connotation’ (p. 15). The process requires interpreting the text in terms of wider cultural beliefs, values, and conceptual frameworks. Multiple readings provided a means by which to interrogate press coverage of contraception, the privileged voices within this coverage, and the presence of recurring themes or narratives.

Both authors individually read and re-read each news story, editorial, and letter to the editor, looking for key words, metaphors, phrases, and sentences related to contraception. Narrative elements about contraception were initially grouped according to topic (e.g. references to contraception found in articles about contraception as a medical issue were grouped together). The authors then worked collectively to identify the connotative or latent meaning of the text, as well as recurring and overlapping narratives. The process enabled us to move beyond the surface meaning of the stories (e.g. Catholic Church opposes ACA mandate) to their underlying meaning (e.g. religious opposition to women controlling their ability to conceive). Disagreements were resolved through re-readings of the texts and further discussion. The process enabled the identification of striking stories, editorials, and voices as well as those that did not fit a pattern, providing a picture of American society as it held yet another debate over contraception. Before turning to the findings, a brief history of birth control sets the stage for the 2000–2013 narrative about contraception.

Birth control: A brief history

While the phrase ‘birth control’ is relatively new (coined by Margaret Sanger less than 100 years ago), the use of contraceptives traces back to the early Egyptians (Engelman, 2011). For almost 3300 years, contraception use was fairly common and without restriction (Engelman, 2011; Platoni, 2010). Communities knew of women’s efforts to prevent pregnancy through contraception, but the efforts were rarely viewed as illegal (Tone, 1997). By the 19th century, the shrinking size of the American household was attributed to the use of contraceptives and other birth control methods (Collins, 2003; Thurer, 1994). Public acceptance was uneven, however, as many Victorian men and women considered contraception the method of prostitutes despite the common use of contraceptives among middle- and upper-class Victorian women (Engelman, 2011; Platoni, 2010). During the late 1800s, contraception was available through the postal system, from free thinkers who labeled it ‘feminine hygiene’, or through doctors who publicly opposed but quietly provided contraceptives to married women (Endres, 1968; Hajo, 2010; Reed, 1978). All these events generated little press. This changed with the passage of the Comstock Act.

In 1873, the US Congress followed the wishes of devout Congregationalist and reformer Anthony Comstock when it amended the US 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). It bears noting that the Comstock Act became law after women had begun moving into the public sphere. Many women had assumed responsibility to restore public morality after the Industrial Revolution spurred concerns about the moral well-being of the country. These Redemptive Mothers performed ‘municipal housekeeping’ by focusing on pornography, prostitution, alcohol consumption, venereal disease, as well as the health and welfare of women, children, and the poor (Cutter, 2003). Women had also entered the workforce in greater numbers and joined suffragist, temperance, and moral reform and purity campaigns. While some women opposed contraception, they did not necessarily oppose efforts to control pregnancy. Some suffragists, for example, supported the idea of ‘voluntary motherhood’ and the desire for sex without fear of pregnancy. Strikingly similar to modern times, these events, along with concerns over ‘race suicide’, resulted in a political and cultural backlash by groups and individuals like Comstock who were threatened by women’s public advancement and their desire and ability to control their bodies and fertility. 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 it was ruled unconstitutional in 1983. All these events drew the attention of the press. The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, covered the battle that ensued over the Comstock Act and revealed a nation divided over the issue (Garner, 2014).

With the onset of World War I, the battle over contraception quieted for a time, as did press coverage, but it did not die (Flamiano, 1998). Sanger, Goldman, and other birth control activists continued a decades-long social reform campaign to increase contraception education and access. In response to demand for these services, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America opened a nationwide network of family planning clinics in 1942. The social reform movement gradually increased public discussion about contraception as a matter of public health until 1945.

In 1960, ‘the Pill’ was approved for contraceptive use, again drawing press coverage about the safety and morality of contraceptives (Kruvand, 2012). After 5 years, the Supreme Court ruled that the Comstock Act violated ‘marital privacy’, and it ruled again in 1972 that unmarried individuals also had the right to contraceptives (Baer, 2002; Joffe, 1986; Kruvand, 2012). These court rulings, along with President Nixon’s 1970 Title X legislation (a program of the *Public Health Service Act* that enabled federal funding for family planning services, including contraception), seemingly signaled a change in the contraception debate. The battle, however, was far from over.

After 30 years, Nixon supported family planning clinics through Title X, and two decades after the Supreme Court overturned the Comstock Act, the Bush administration cut Title X funding and began advocating abstinence-only education (Hernandez, 2001). These cuts occurred as three new birth control products, *Mirena*, *Lunelle*, and *OrthoEvra*, were introduced in the market, all between 2000 and 2002. After 10 years, in 2010, the Obama administration overturned Bush-era policies and established the ACA, which included a mandate that companies fully cover all Food and Drug Administration (FDA)–approved ‘contraceptive methods and sterilization procedures’ including intrauterine devices (IUDs) and ‘morning-after pills’ (Bonner, 2013). The requirement proved to be highly contentious; some objected to the entire mandate, while others objected to the ‘morning-after pills’ and IUDs, which they considered abortifacients. The conservative religious backlash against the law coincided with ongoing efforts by birth control advocacy groups, such as the Center for Reproductive Rights (2014), to increase reproductive rights for women around the globe.

Findings: The 2000–2013 contraception narrative

The 2000–2013 *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* press coverage of birth control resembled that of the 1873–1917 contraception coverage by the same newspapers (Garner, 2014). Contemporary press coverage, however, revealed a noted absence of women's voices and an equally notable increase in legal, political, and religious voices. From 2000 to 2013, press coverage by the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that life for contraception advocates was one of remembered progress and projected setbacks, especially for poor women. Press coverage ranged from celebrations of key moments in contraception history (2000–2002), to efforts to curtail contraception access for poor women at home and abroad (2000–2007), to the ACA's mandate of contraception coverage and the resulting backlash (2009–2013). Taken together, the 2000–2013 press accounts revealed overlapping narratives about a woman's right to access birth control, the political divide over contraception, religious freedom, and morality.

Contraception has a long history but women still have a fight on their hands

Early coverage by the *New York Times* focused on the history and recent successes of the contraception movement. In 2000, the newspaper observed that the pill was introduced at a time when 'a nation of women [were] increasingly eager for greater certainty in preventing unwanted pregnancies ...' (Brody, 2000: F1). Almost as a demonstration of progress, the newspaper reported that Vermont had expanded medical benefits to teenage girls, allowing them to receive free counseling and contraceptives without parental consent or knowledge (Rosenbaum, 2000). A year later, the newspaper reviewed Andrea Tone's book on the history of contraception (Fuentes, 2001) and pointed to the use of contraceptives long before the 1873 Comstock Act. Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* argued that birth control made women healthier people and 'more stable employees' (Girion, 2001: 1). These narratives, however, accounted for a very small portion of the press coverage and only occurred during the first 2 years of this study.

Overall, early press accounts (2000–2006) provided a gloomier assessment of contraception's place in women's lives. News stories, editorials, and letters to the editor focused on the Bush administration's efforts to roll back women's reproductive rights. These efforts included the elimination of contraceptive coverage for federal employees (this was restored), blocked funding to family planning groups that provided reproductive services overseas, abstinence-only education programs, opposition to the 'morning-after pill', and support for pharmacists opposed to dispensing contraceptives. These efforts were not warmly received by the press or the public. One letter to the *Los Angeles Times* (2001b: 6), for example, observed that Americans were sliding 'back a century, especially for poor women', and another letter called the elimination of contraception coverage for federal employees 'scary' (2001c: B8). Similarly, the *New York Times* reported that the New York State Assembly easily passed a prostate cancer screening bill but fought long over women's contraception coverage (Sengupta, 2001b). By 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* announced 'the birth control divide', citing statistics eerily similar to those used by Sanger and her followers in 1916. The newspaper reported that poor and uneducated women were falling behind their 'more affluent peers in their ability to control fertility and plan childbearing' (Simon, 2006: F1).

By 2010, the debate over contraception turned more strident with the passage of the Obama administration's ACA. Between 2010 and 2013, both newspapers joined the medical community in support of the ACA's contraception coverage mandate. The *New York Times* (2011b) cautioned the Obama administration to resist pressure to weaken the law, and the *Los Angeles Times* (2011) called the removal of 'financial barriers' preventing women from using contraceptives 'smart preventive medicine and a social good' (p. 25). The *Los Angeles Times* reinforced its position when it noted that 'commercial greed and a strong patriarchal streak in American politics' were keeping the pill out of stores and hurting women in the process (Potts, 2012: 15). Similarly, medical groups recommended that insurers provide 'contraceptives for women "free of charge"' (Pear,

2011: 1) and that doctors provide underage teenage girls with emergency contraception prescriptions instead of waiting until a young girl's 'plan A goes awry' (Khan, 2012: 5).

Despite apparent support for the ACA by the two newspapers and the medical community, press coverage after 2010 revealed increasing political and legislative efforts to limit contraception access and family planning services. Republicans reportedly viewed the ACA contraception coverage mandate as 'overreach' and an effort by President Obama to 'impose his secular values on the people of this country', while Democrats reportedly called the Grand Old Party' (GOP) response an effort to 'turn back the clock on women's rights' (Mascaro and Hennessey, 2012: 7), 'interfer[e] with women's health', and engage in a larger 'systematic war against women' (Pear, 2012b: 1). The *New York Times* (2011a) called the 'Republican plan' to eliminate Title X funding 'egregious', 'odious', and an 'assault on women's health and freedom' (p. 10). In one of the few times the newspaper quoted a woman, Senate Democrat Dianne Feinstein called conservative opposition part of a larger effort to 'cut back on rights and services to women' (Weisman, 2012: 1).

Both newspapers reported that the Obama administration worked and stumbled toward 'guarantee[ing] women access to contraceptives' (Pear, 2012a: 14). The *New York Times*, for example, reported that FDA plans to make the 'morning-after pill', known as Plan B One-Step, available over-the-counter to all women and girls (Belluck, 2013) were met with opposition from the Justice Department, conservatives, and anti-abortion groups (Belluck and Shear, 2013). Even as the Justice Department tried to restrict access for girls younger than 15 years, President Obama reportedly said, 'I think it's very important that women have control over their health care choices. ... [and] that they have access to contraception' (Shear, 2013: 16).

The contraception debate also influenced the 2012 presidential campaign. According to the *New York Times*, Obama charged Republicans of moving backward with 'policies more suited to the 1950s' (Calmes, 2012: 15), and Republican candidates Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney questioned women's access to contraception. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Republicans charged Sandra Fluke, the Georgetown University law student labeled a 'slut' by radio personality Rush Limbaugh for her support of the contraception mandate, with 'trying to evoke a new generation of reproductive freedom warriors' (Abcarian, 2012b: U1). In short, press coverage revealed that progress in American women's reproductive rights between 2000 and 2013 was uneven at best and fraught with efforts by those determined to turn back the tide. At the same time, the debate over women's reproductive rights was entwined with one over contraception and religious freedom.

What would God do? The religious debate over contraception coverage

The 2000–2013 contraception dispute became especially divisive as legislators, religious advocates, business leaders, and the general public debated the role of religious freedom in women's right to contraception. Press coverage between 2000 and 2006 focused primarily on the state level and centered on a 'conscience clause', which would exempt the Catholic Church and its affiliates from providing contraception coverage to female employees (McKinley, 2001; Sengupta, 2001a). Archbishop Egan of New York, for example, reportedly argued that 'contraception extremists [were] ... even willing to use the health of New York women as a pawn, by linking the contraception mandate to needed health care measures for women' (Dewan, 2002: B5).

Beginning in 2002, religious leaders also used legal means to secure their release from state mandates. Eight Catholic bishops in New York, for example, sued the state in an effort to block its contraception mandate (Levy, 2002). Such efforts, however, were not always successful. The California Supreme Court, for example, ruled that Catholic Charities had to provide contraception coverage despite religious objections (Strom, 2004), and the New York Court of Appeals ruled that religious institutions, including the Catholic Church, had to abide by state law mandating contraception coverage if they provided prescription coverage to their employees (Lueck, 2006).

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Catholic Church also engaged politicians over contraception and was sometimes contradictory in its opposition to it. In 2003, US Catholic Bishops reportedly threatened Democratic presidential candidates with excommunication because they supported same-sex marriage and birth control (Lobdell and Watanabe, 2003). After 2 years, citing a 1994 quote by the Archbishop of Portland that the Church should not have to pay child support because ‘the child’s mother had engaged “in unprotected intercourse ... when [she] should have known that could result in pregnancy”’, the *Los Angeles Times* observed that the Church’s position rang counter to its teachings that contraceptives are ‘intrinsically evil’ (Lobdell, 2005: B1). This back and forth between religious and political leaders over contraception continued for the remainder of the Bush administration. As one of his final acts before leaving Washington, President Bush announced the “‘right of conscience’ rule’ allowing health-care workers and facilities the right to ‘refuse to participate in any procedure they find morally objectionable’, including the dissemination of birth control (Savage, 2008: 18).

The religious debate over contraception became more heated and national after 2008. According to both newspapers, the Obama administration rescinded Bush-era ‘right of conscience’ policies soon after it entered the White House (Levey, 2009) and then included the contraception coverage mandate in its 2010 ACA. These actions energized political foes, religious conservatives, traditional religious institutions, and affiliated organizations opposed to providing contraception to women. While editorials in the *New York Times* (2011a) applauded the contraception coverage mandate, Republican lawmakers charged the Obama administration with ‘an unprecedented attack on religious freedoms’ and ‘assault on religion’ although they previously supported expanding contraception access (Geiger and Levey, 2012: 7). Some states seemingly agreed with the Republican position. Missouri lawmakers, for example, ‘enacted a new religious exemption from insurance coverage of birth control’ although it already had such a provision in the books (*Los Angeles Times*, 2012b: 22).

While press accounts between 2010 and 2013 tended to focus on the battle between the Obama administration and the US Catholic Bishops over the ACA, other religious groups also drew press attention. The *New York Times* reported, for example, that the National Association of Evangelicals argued that employers with religious objections to contraception would be forced to pay for something they viewed as ‘morally wrong’ (Pear, 2012c: 17), especially in the case of IUDs and the ‘morning-after pill’. Such opposition was somewhat ironic as the *Los Angeles Times* reported that 28 states mandated contraception coverage and that religious institutions and their affiliates were already in compliance with state laws (Landsberg, 2012; *Los Angeles Times*, 2012a).

Facing intense pressure, the Obama administration offered a compromise that ‘would guarantee women access to contraceptives “while accommodating religious liberty interests”’ (Pear, 2012a: 14). Despite the Obama administration’s attempt at conciliation, 43 Roman Catholic dioceses, social services, schools, and groups filed suit in 12 federal courts challenging the law and rejecting the compromise offered by the administration (Goodstein, 2012). As observed by the *Los Angeles Times*, these groups were not concerned with ‘women’s access to medical services’ (Duncan, 2012: 7). A year later, a *New York Times* (2013a) op-ed observed that religious and conservative groups failed to ‘recognize that the First Amendment prescribes a system that includes freedom from religion as well as freedom of religion’ (p. 18).

By 2013, nonreligious-affiliated businesses had also joined the opposition, the most prominent being Hobby Lobby (*New York Times*, 2013b). According to both newspapers, these businesses objected to the mandate, defied the mandate, and/or filed lawsuits of their own. From the time the ACA went into effect, more than 48 lawsuits sought religious exceptions to the contraception mandate (Savage, 2013). Judges across the country reportedly were left to decide whether private employers could cite religious beliefs as a valid reason for denying contraception coverage to employees. Employer opposition to the contraception mandate, however, was not based solely on religious freedom. Concerns about morality, promiscuity, and the American family were also embedded in their rhetoric.

Contraception use leads to promiscuity, immorality, and threatens the family

The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* also covered the issue of women and contraception and 'promiscuity', 'immorality', 'sexual license', and threats to the 'traditional family'. These concerns echoed Victorian era beliefs that equated contraception with prostitution. Similarly, the use of the phrase 'traditional family' linked contraception use to conservative opposition to sex and potential pregnancy outside of heterosexual marriage. A 2001 *Los Angeles Times* editorial noted both the history of birth control and the double standard at play when it observed:

Even when the courts finally declared diaphragms, pills, foams and condoms no longer contraband, a stigma stuck. Insurers wouldn't cover their cost. ... Credit Viagra with doing what generations of public health and women's rights advocates couldn't. (Los Angeles Times, 2001a: B16)

Citing an ABC News–Washington Post poll that found '88% of Catholics believe that it is morally acceptable to use birth control, and 67% believe that it is acceptable to have premarital sex', the *Los Angeles Times* wrestled with whether Plan B would make teenagers and women more promiscuous and careless (Lobdell and Watanabe, 2003: 14). The *New York Times* (2004) observed that the conservative position that Plan B would 'encourage teenage promiscuity' played a role in the FDA's decision to delay over-the-counter access to the pill (p. 14). The newspaper reported, however, that the belief that emergency contraception 'promote[d] illicit sex' was not supported by scientific evidence (*New York Times*, 2005b: 20).

Politicians appeared to be especially concerned about the morality of poor women. One politician reportedly 'shot down' birth control subsidies for low-income women because 'that would be like subsidizing promiscuity', and another said it was his "'hope that reducing access to contraception for recreational users and those not prepared to parent will give them time to consider the consequences" of having sex' (Simon, 2006: F1). At the same time, a *New York Times* op-ed connected the contemporary morality debate with those surrounding suffrage and contraception in Margaret Sanger's day (Feldt, 2006). Such sentiments were, indeed, reminiscent of Victorian era beliefs that sex without contraception worked to both prevent the act and ensure marriage if it did result in pregnancy (Gordon, 1997).

Beginning in 2005, press accounts focusing on the morality of women were sometimes overshadowed by individual and institutional objections to contraception on moral grounds. California and New York lawmakers reportedly debated requiring pharmacists to fill prescriptions, including those for contraception, even if 'they found them immoral' (*New York Times*, 2005a; Rau, 2005). After 3 years, the *Los Angeles Times* (2008) called Bush administration plans to shield health-care providers who found contraceptives morally objectionable an 'attempt to roll back the clock on reproductive rights to the early 1960s' (p. 22).

By 2012, the debate about the morality of women was thoroughly mixed with politics, religion, and celebrity. Most notably, during the 2012 presidential campaign, Republican Party candidate Rick Santorum reportedly argued there were 'dangers of contraception in this country' (Abcarian, 2012a: 10), and those who supported contraception, gay marriage, and abortion were 'radical feminists [who] succeeded in undermining the traditional family ...' (Abcarian, 2012c: 7). Santorum had support from religious leaders and some in the medical community who viewed contraception as 'morally wrong' (Pear, 2012d). Echoing sentiments expressed in the 1873–1917 press coverage, the president of Pro-life Obstetricians and Gynecologists noted that 'fear of pregnancy is a deterrent to sexual activity. When you introduce something like this [Plan B], it changes people's behaviors, and they have more risky sex' (Rabin, 2013: D5).

Finally, press coverage of contraception featured Sandra Fluke, Georgetown University law student, and Rush Limbaugh, conservative radio host. According to press accounts, in 2012 Fluke testified before Congress in support of the ACA contraception mandate for women. In response, Limbaugh reportedly called Fluke a 'slut', a

‘prostitute’, and a ‘feminazi’ (Daum, 2012a: 19) and said she wanted ‘to be paid to have sex’ (Geiger, 2012: 8). Limbaugh found support in Dana Loesch, a conservative commentator, who reportedly tweeted, ‘If you expect me to pay higher insurance premiums to cover your “free” birth control, I can call you whatever I want’ (Dowd, 2012). The *Los Angeles Times* labeled Limbaugh’s rant an ‘outrageous and utterly false narrative about female birth control use’ (Daum, 2012b: 19), and *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd (2012) called Limbaugh a ‘puppet master of the Republican Party’ (p. 1). Dowd also argued that Limbaugh was ‘brutalizing’ Fluke and that while ‘Rush and Newt Gingrich can play the studs ... women pressing for health care rights are denigrated as sluts’. Indeed, Limbaugh’s rant reflected 19th century assumptions that only prostitutes use contraception.

Conclusion

Life for American women has changed dramatically since 1873 when, among other things, they lacked both the right to vote and the legal ability to access contraceptives. Today, American women have more personal, political, and social power, but their position remains one that is structurally subordinate to most men (Carter and Steiner, 2004). In the 2000–2013 *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* press coverage of contraception, a woman’s ability to control her own reproductive needs was debated and restricted, largely by men. Indeed, the implied assumption appeared to be that because women had made advances within the larger culture, including reproductive control, the issue of women’s ability to control their own bodies and sexuality was settled. Presenting the debate as a matter of religious freedom, morality, or employer rights enabled the press to focus on the political rhetoric of largely conservative groups pandering to their ultra-conservative base. By largely accepting the ideology that contraception was not a reproductive rights issue, the press privileged powerful interest groups and treated the contraception debate as one that need not include women. To be clear, both newspapers supported contraception access for *all* women in their editorials. But because their press coverage emphasized the positions of religious, political, and business leaders, most of whom were men, and de-emphasized the women who use contraception or provide contraceptive materials and information (e.g. Planned Parenthood), the overall narrative became one in which the lived experience of women was less important.

Aside from the occasional female politician or Planned Parenthood leader, women’s voices, feminist ones in particular, were missing from the press coverage. When women’s voices were heard, they appeared in the few narratives covering contraception history, or efforts to regulate women’s bodies, or stories wherein women were shamed for their position. The press covered renewed efforts to control and limit contraception access for poor women yet largely ignored the impact on these women’s lives. Instead, the news narratives reflected the patronizing, paternalistic stance that is frequently taken toward the poor, which views them as lazy, ignorant, immoral people who need to be told what to do and how to do it. In the rhetoric promoting limited contraception access for poor women, Victorian era connections between contraception use and prostitution coincided with views that sex should only occur within the confines of marriage. To enforce this ideology, abstinence-only methods of birth control were touted as the only ‘safe’ means of preventing pregnancy. Denying poor women access to contraceptives would force them to accept this position. Additionally, unlike the 1873–1917 press coverage wherein the class differences in contraception information and access were actively discussed as a matter of social justice, the 2000–2013 coverage by the two newspapers largely ignored the issue, further marginalizing poor women. The question is ‘why?’

While both newspapers seemingly supported women’s reproductive rights and the ACA contraception mandate, the overarching narrative was decidedly masculine, privileging male voices, despite the fact that one-quarter of the press coverage was written by women. The status of the predominantly male political, social, and religious conservatives, as well as their position of power within the contraception debate, was established through news stories, editorials, and letters that privileged them as news sources. There was the occasional woman columnist,

most notably Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times*, and source (e.g. Senator Dianne Feinstein), but these women were either speaking *for* women or as representatives of organizations or institutions. The one woman who dared speak as subject, Sandra Fluke, was pilloried as a ‘slut’ and a ‘prostitute’. In other words, in the contraception debate women were treated as ‘second-tier’ subjects, and their voices were effectively silenced through ridicule (e.g. Fluke) or ignored (poor women). Women’s ‘full and equal participation’ was notably missing (Rakow and Wackwitz, 2004).

Women’s limited participation in the 2000–2013 contraception debate can also be explained by journalistic conventions (e.g. Poindexter et al., 2008; Rakow and Kranich, 1991). While ‘women’ have traditionally been advertisers’ desired target, poor women have not. Since poor women are not targeted consumers or readers of newspapers, press logic would ask, ‘why target them in press coverage?’ Similarly, as women of means were less impacted by proposed restrictions to contraception access, their news value was likely diminished. Furthermore, the news stories, editorials, and letters to the editor about contraception were placed in the stereotypically male ‘hard news’ sections (Rakow and Kranich, 1991).

While the placement of stories about women’s reproductive rights in the hard news section is not new, the largely ideological debate over the social control of women’s bodies by male-dominated economic, political, religious, and social groups signals that a debate once led by women like Margaret Sanger is now firmly controlled by men. As Faludi (2007) and others note, these attempts to regulate women’s bodies and push them back into the private sphere are neither new nor limited to the United States. Cloaked in concerns over promiscuity, immorality, or threats to the American family, contemporary attempts to curtail American women’s reproductive freedoms are strikingly familiar to efforts to control women’s bodies globally. From Saudi Arabia to India to Ecuador, Yemen, and Vatican City, governments and/or conservative religious people and their organizations have established laws to curtail women’s freedom of movement and association, as well as their access to education, health care, and their right to vote (World Economic Forum, 2013). By largely excluding women from the press coverage of the contraception debate in America, the power of political, social, and religious groups to control the narrative and women’s lives is confirmed. The lived experience of women who desire reproductive control has evolved from 1873 when press coverage at least gave women a platform to speak to women’s issues. By the end of 2013, this power appears to be lost to powerful interest groups who have taken control of the debate.

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