"SOMETIMES BANNING ABORTION DOESN'T MEAN FEWER ABORTIONS OR FEWER BABIES DIE - IT JUST MEANS MORE WOMEN DIE": A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF ROE V. WADE PARTISAN CABLE NEWS COVERAGE

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Identity Narratives

The repeal of Roe v. Wade in 2022 marked a pivotal moment in American discourse, intensifying debates over reproductive rights, gender, and morality. Within this contentious landscape, cable news emerged as a key site for constructing and disseminating narratives that both reflected and reinforced partisan ideologies. These narratives are rooted in the portrayal of identity groups, which are central to how cable news portray contentious issues (Peck, 2019; Polletta & Callahan, 2019).

Identity narratives in media coverage serve multiple purposes (Kreiss, 2018; Peck, 2019; Polletta & Callahan, 2019). They function to humanize abstract policy debates, evoke emotional responses, and align audience sympathies with specific ideological positions (Peck, 2019; Polletta & Callahan, 2019). In the context of the abortion debate, identity narratives often focus on groups such as women, children, religious communities, and political actors, highlighting their roles, stakes, and moral standing. For instance, women are frequently depicted as either victims of oppressive policies or agents of moral harm, depending on the ideological leanings of the outlet. Similarly, children - particularly unborn children - are central to narratives emphasizing the sanctity of life and fetal personhood (Woodruff, 2019; Halva-Neubauer & Zeigler, 2010).

This study uncovers how partisan cable news outlets construct these narratives to advance ideological agendas. Left-leaning outlets, such as CNN and MSNBC, often portray women as victims of restrictive policies, presenting the repeal as a violation of individual rights and autonomy. In contrast, right-leaning Fox News emphasizes moral protection, portraying Republicans as defenders of unborn children. These competing narratives reflect the outlets' ideological commitments and their roles in shaping audience perspectives.

By analyzing how identity groups are portrayed, this study reveals how cable news uses narratives in their coverage of contentious issues to reflect partisan perspectives. These narratives not only shape public understanding of the political debates but also reinforce broader ideological divides, demonstrating the media's role in constructing meaning around societal issues (Peck, 2019; Polletta & Callahan, 2019).

Method

This study analyzed identity narratives surrounding the repeal of Roe v. Wade using a dataset of cable news transcripts collected through UCLA's Cable News Archive. Transcripts from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC were retrieved for the period May 1 to July 15, 2022, encompassing the leak of the draft decision (May 2) and the final ruling (June 24). This timeframe allowed for a comprehensive examination of media discourse during the critical months surrounding the decision.

The dataset initially included 8,871 transcripts mentioning "abortion." A keyword list was developed to identify references to key identity groups, including "women," "children," "Christian," "Republicans," "Democrats," "doctors," and "unborn," as well as phrases like "pro-abortion" and "make America great again." These keywords reflect groups and identities central to abortion discourse. Filtering for transcripts that mentioned at least one keyword reduced the dataset to 5,101 entries from 48 programs across CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.

This study does not distinguish between hard news and editorial content, as both contribute to the narratives audiences encounter (Trifiro et al., 2022). Opinion-driven programs, particularly during primetime, play a crucial role in shaping public discourse (Peck, 2019). Including such programming ensures a holistic analysis of the themes and narratives employed in cable news coverage, reflecting the full spectrum of content from reporting to ideological commentary.

A template approach to thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret recurring patterns in the transcripts. This method provides a balance between structure and flexibility, enabling the systematic identification of themes while allowing for nuanced interpretation (Brooks et al., 2015; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Analysis focused on two dimensions: the cable news outlet and the identity groups mentioned. Transcripts were reviewed in multiple stages, starting with open coding to identify recurring phrases and concepts. These were then grouped into clusters to reveal overarching narratives. Thematic validation ensured the reliability of findings and captured the complexity of storytelling elements, such as characterization and editorial framing.

Discussion

The analysis reveals that identity narratives are central to how cable news outlets frame the repeal of Roe v. Wade. These narratives are constructed through the selective portrayal of identity groups, their assigned roles, and the themes that underpin their portrayal. By examining these elements, this study uncovers the ways in which cable

news outlets construct competing narratives that align with their ideological perspectives.

On CNN and MSNBC, narratives frequently emphasized victimization, autonomy, and resistance. Women were depicted as victims of Republican policies, with narratives stressing the harms caused by the Roe repeal. These outlets framed the decision as an attack on rights and equality, portraying women as central to the struggle for reproductive freedom. Other groups, such as doctors and Democrats, were also prominent, cast as advocates for women's rights and public health. Fox News constructed narratives that emphasized themes of morality, protection, and traditional values. Women are often portrayed as central to the moral debate, with narratives highlighting their roles as mothers. Republicans are frequently depicted as defenders of life, with narratives emphasizing their commitment to protecting unborn children. Religious groups, particularly Christians, are also prominent in these narratives, with coverage framing them as moral leaders advocating for the sanctity of life.

These contrasting portrayals illustrate the broader ideological divides between the outlets. Left-leaning coverage centered on themes of autonomy and progress, framing the Roe repeal as a setback for gender equality. Right-leaning coverage emphasized morality and protection, celebrating the decision as a victory for life and traditional values. These narratives not only shaped audience perceptions of the abortion debate but also reinforced broader partisan divides.

The study also highlights the ways in which identity groups are activated in cable news coverage. For instance, women are portrayed in a variety of roles, from victims to moral agents, depending on the ideological orientation of the outlet. Similarly, children and unborn children are central to narratives emphasizing the sanctity of life, while religious groups are often invoked to provide moral legitimacy to the arguments presented. These portrayals illustrate the ways in which cable news outlets construct narratives that resonate with their ideological audiences, using identity groups to evoke emotional responses and align audience sympathies with specific positions.

The template approach enabled a systematic analysis of recurring themes, capturing the complexity of identity narratives across outlets. This provided a comprehensive understanding of how identity groups were portrayed and the broader narratives constructed around them. By examining the connections between identity groups, their roles, and the themes framing their portrayal, this study offers valuable insights into how cable news constructs and disseminates ideological narratives.

This study underscores the importance of identity narratives in shaping public discourse on contentious issues. By analyzing the portrayal of identity groups in cable news coverage, it demonstrates how media outlets construct competing narratives to reflect partisan perspectives (Peck, 2019; Polletta & Callahan, 2019). These narratives not only shape audience understanding of political debates but also reinforce broader ideological divides, illustrating the powerful role of media in cultivating meaning surrounding societal issues.

This research contributes to the literature on media, politics, and public opinion, highlighting the centrality of identity narratives in partisan media coverage. By laying a foundation for understanding the role of media in shaping public discourse, this study provides a basis for further exploration of the intersection between identity, media, and ideology.

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