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What I learned from reporting on both sides of today's abortion debate

By **Neha Shastry**

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Reporter Neha Shastry sits with patient waiting to speak with the abortion provider at Trust Women Oklahoma City.

I became aware of how divisive the topic of abortion access is in the U.S at a very young age. It was one of the first images I confronted as an immigrant child in the late '90s: Every Saturday there would be a group of anti-abortion protesters holding signs with graphic imagery, chanting outside a clinic in Rockville, Maryland. I wasn't yet aware

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of the nuances of the debate. But what I was aware of was the passion that permeated that sidewalk, how staunchly against abortion those protesters were, and how committed they were to be there every single weekend. I soon learned that passion existed on the other side of the debate as well, and even before I started a career in journalism, I knew that I wanted to find a way to make sense of the complexities of this topic and capture the many nuances that lie between and beneath the differing perspectives.

When I found myself in my first newsroom, and several more thereafter, I learned that stories about abortion access were not easily green-lit by news editors. The quality of the pre-reporting I did aside, the feedback I heard ranged from, “But what am I going to see?” to “This topic is too divisive for our audience,” to “We don’t know how this will be received.” I took this feedback and decided to let it motivate me further, even though I fundamentally disagreed with it. In the U.S today, **one in four women** will have an abortion in her lifetime, and since 2010, over **400 restrictions** to abortion access have been enacted on the state level. These statistics alone show the relevancy and gravity of the debate. I wanted to find a way to cover it.

As I dove deeper into the issue over the years, I knew that there were several tenets of the debate that I would need to contend with in the eventual reporting I did. First, that on the pro-abortion side, the idea of a woman’s right to choose was paramount, and that women who seek abortions in this country are disproportionately women of color from low-income communities — they don’t have much support even if they wanted a child, and that while abortion is extremely safe, lack of access to care and anti-abortion regulations can make it dangerous. On the anti-abortion side, the arguments are inextricably linked with religion and the belief that life begins at conception, therefore, abortion is murder. Additionally, both sides were consulting their own set of data and facts.

I knew that any piece I did would have to include both sides, and the best way to do that was to pay special attention to who I reached out to share their perspectives with me. Let me tell you, it was not an easy feat.

The pro-abortion side

Kansas has long been an abortion battleground. Wichita was the site of the “**Summer of Mercy**” in the early ’90s, and it was where Dr.

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George Tiller, a prominent abortion provider, practiced. Dr. Tiller was **shot and killed** by someone who disagreed with his work in 2009. He had been a target for decades before. Since his death, an organization named **Trust Women** was founded to uphold his legacy. I felt like this organization was a natural fit for my CNN series because it embodied how dangerous this work can be, but upon speaking to Julie Burkhart, its founder, I learned that they were running clinics in other states as well.

In Oklahoma, they were bringing doctors in from out of state to provide care. After speaking to the several doctors they work with, I chose **Anuj Khattar** because I wanted the CNN audience to experience this story through a male doctor's eyes. We too often think of abortion as a women's issue, but it is a human issue. As we filmed with Dr. Khattar, we were sure to interview others who worked in the clinic, as well as patients who consented to being filmed. Being able to just be in the clinic for as long as we were let us to humanize and normalize a controversial space.

The anti-abortion side

It was a challenge to figure out how best to portray the anti-abortion side of this debate. Too often we see voices from protesters or politicians, and I wanted to do this differently. Since I had spent extensive time in an abortion clinic interviewing medical staff and a doctor, I felt it was only appropriate to find an anti-abortion voice from the medical community, so we had a level playing field in our piece. I found Dr. Christina Francis through the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Dr. Francis is a practicing OBGYN in Indiana, and she has worked around the world, spending the early part of her career in Kenya. Additionally, she's a prominent voice in the anti-abortion space. She and I had a series of frank discussions about how anti-abortion voices are often portrayed in the media. She suggested that if we could sit down and talk it out, we could achieve a level of nuance that is often lacking in coverage of the abortion debate.

What I learned about hewing to the facts

Like many topics that are extremely politicized in our culture, there is a lot of misinformation out there. When you have opposing sides consulting differing data and contesting facts, it's a struggle to portray each side fairly while still being factually accurate. Dr. Francis sent me numerous studies and papers that informed her stance, but upon reviewing them carefully, I found that even the

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medical studies were funded by anti-abortion groups, and didn't meet widely agreed upon medical and scientific standards. This led to me to be very careful about making sure we included her perspective fairly, but also fact checked her claims using data that is accepted by the medical community at large. In this age of fake news, there's often the dilemma of figuring out how to portray misinformation. While we tried to give both sides a voice, we still prioritized the facts.

Watch CNN's "Restricting abortion access" [here](#).

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COMMENTS



The Importance of Terminology

Posted by Tina T. (not verified) | Sat, 2019-03-23

I am pro-choice, and I find the term "pro-abortion" problematic, as it seems to suggest that those in favor of a woman's right to choose is a cheering section for the practice of ending pregnancies, which is a gross misrepresentation, to say the least. Likewise, I find referring to the other side as "pro-life" to be problematic (I realize your term here is "anti-abortion," and I think that's fair). People who believe in a woman's right to choose are pro-life in the sense that they champion a woman's right to determine the future course of her own life, not to mention the argument that depriving women of access to safe, legal abortions will result in the deaths of many women who feel they have no option besides risking an unsafe abortion. Therefore, it is my opinion that the most accurate terminology is "pro-choice" and "anti-abortion."

[reply](#)



Abortion

Posted by | Thu, 2019-04-11

I think abortion should be left to the parent(s). If the parent or parent don't want the child then they should be able to abort it, but a way to avoid this conversation or make less common is to educate people on wear babies come from, and how they are made.

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