

How to report on abortion: A guide for journalists, editors and media outlets



The portrayal of abortion in the media can have a major sway on public perception of abortion, and can even influence policy agendas. As such, the Campaign (in partnership with IPPF), has just launched [media guidelines for journalists, news outlets and editors](#) who seek to write about abortion.

Our media guidelines intend to aide progressive journalists writing on abortion who we understand face a myriad of challenges. Sisson, Herold and Woodruff (2017)¹ interviewed over thirty journalists reporting on abortion in the US, and found that they faced stigmatisation and political polarisation when reporting on abortion. We therefore consider journalists as our co-workers in the campaign for the right to abortion, and our media guidelines hope to assist them in their work.

Accurate reporting can go a long way to confronting abortion stigma and challenging common misconceptions around abortion. Consequently, the guidelines begin by setting out some basic facts on abortion, including how widespread it is and the types of legal restrictions that exist. We dispel the common myths, for instance, by explicating its safety as a procedure when done properly and highlighting that it has no causal connection to mental health.

Even where journalists are well-meaning, they may unintentionally use incorrect language to describe abortion. Language is powerful, and plays a vital role in stigmatising abortion. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff, has written about the language used in politics and polarising topics, his most well-known book being “Don’t think about an elephant”. He reminds us not to unwittingly co-opt the framing of the right-wing. To prevent journalists from falling into this trap, we have compiled a list of ‘Dos and Don’ts’ when reporting on abortion. For example, we must use terms like ‘pro-choice’ and ‘pregnant woman’, rather than ‘anti-abortion’ and ‘mother’.

In addition, we direct the media on how to use accurate imagery of pregnancy and abortion. Almost every week at the Campaign, we notice examples of positive articles on abortion, but accompanied with an inaccurate image. Often editors include photos of very late pregnancies or images of the fetus as if it is fully formed or independent from the woman. This is misleading, as most abortions take place in the first trimester or early second trimester of pregnancies.

Several journalists interviewed by Sisson, Herold and Woodruff felt they must present the anti-abortion argument along with the pro-choice case in order to maintain balance. We therefore explain how to report in a way that represents balance and truth. Indeed, the pro-choice viewpoint is inherently balanced as it respects each individual’s right to decide what’s best for them. Furthermore, journalists frequently desire a personal angle as a powerful way to speak about abortion – hence, we include a section on how to publish personal testimonies of women who want to share their stories.

¹ Gretchen Sisson, Stephanie Herold and Katie Woodruff (2017) “The stakes are so high”: Interviews with progressive journalists reporting on abortion. *Contraception* Dec; 96 (6) pp. 395-400 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28844876>

Along with our media guidelines, the Campaign has also launched a [Press Room](#) page on our website which has additional in-depth resources, including the following:

- ❖ A more detailed piece on sharing personal stories
- ❖ Best practice examples of articles and images relating to abortion
- ❖ Lastly, editors often demand a fresh take and do not perceive abortion as newsworthy, so we have started to compile examples of potential abortion hooks for journalists.

As the press officer at the Campaign, I proactively work with journalists, and put them in contact with our members where possible to get their voices heard. Please do get in touch if you are keen to work with me in producing accurate and honest portrayals of abortion.

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