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**JUSTIFYING THE NECESSITY OF ANTI-ABORTION LEGISLATION:
AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF MORAL PANIC STYLE IN AMERICAN
PRO-LIFE ADVOCACY AND MEDIA DISCOURSES**

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Abstract: *Since the 1980s, abortion has been "labeled a source of great and bitter political conflict" (Gusfield, 1981). After Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, the discourse surrounding it reached a point where the U.S. debated if a fetus should receive personhood (Zernike, 2024). Consequentially, the broadening of the rights of "unborn babies" (definition of the fetus according to the Louisiana Supreme Court cited in the NYT) limits those of pregnant women. This article aims to explore the working hypothesis that U.S. pro-life advocacy groups and media employed elements of a moral panic style in the period before the Supreme Court Dobbs hearing. The study analyzes the discourse of two right-wing advocacy agencies (Texas Right to Life and Texas Values) and one mainstream satellite media outlet (Fox News).*

Keywords: *moral panic, social problem, women's rights, abortion, American pro-life media*

1. Introduction

One of the legacies of the former Trump administration that still lingers over American society is represented by three new Supreme Court Judges: Neil M. Gorsuch, appointed in April 2017; Brett Kavanaugh, in July 2018; and Amy Coney Barrett, appointed in October 2020 (U.S. Senate, 2020). They secure a strong conservative majority within the American institution that is, according to its public website, the "final arbiter of the law [in the U.S.]" (U.S. Senate, 2020). On June 24, 2022, the effects of this legacy were felt when the Court decided in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* that: "the [U.S.]

Constitution does not confer a right to abortion; *Roe* and *Casey* are overruled" (extract from Newton, 2024). Since then, the abortion public debate has reached such a level that the state of Alabama, for example, in February 2024, decided the embryo is, from a legal point of view, an unborn baby (Bazelon, 2024).

When looking at the consequences of the Dobbs decision and subsequent legislation¹, it can be argued that women's status in the U.S. has become precarious. From a feminist point of view, it could be said that the widening of the fetus or embryo rights transforms women's bodies into incubators, property of the state rather than their possession. Starting from the working hypothesis that pro-life advocacy organizations and media made strategic use of a moral panic style in their portrayal of abortion as immoral and dangerous to society, this article examines what role such stylistic elements may have played in delegitimizing pro-choice policies and garnering support for anti-abortion legislation. For these purposes, the analytical approach taken here is informed by linguistics and will focus on discourse analysis. The article is part of a larger scientific investigation that looked at how American pro-life advocacy groups and media symbolically constructed the public problem represented by abortion. The study² began in September 2021, shortly after Texas passed Senate Bill 8 (SB8)³, one of the pillars in overthrowing the *Roe* and *Cassey* decisions. It ended in May 2022, a month before Dobbs hearing.

The corpus consists of thirty articles. These were purposively selected from two right-wing advocacy organizations' websites, *Texas Right to Life* and *Texas Values*, and a right-wing leaning mainstream satellite T.V. channel, *Fox News*. Eleven articles are from the *Texas Values* group (TxV 1-11), ten articles from *Texas Right to Life* (RTL 1-10), and nine transcripts from the mainstream satellite T.V. channel, *Fox News* (FOX 1-9). The selection is purposive because the final version of the corpus was established after conducting keyword searches on Google, which were assumed from the beginning to lead to articles related to moral panic discourse on abortion in the U.S. The search words were "Texas," "abortion," "pro-abortion," "pro-life," and "Heartbeat Act." "Texas" was selected as a search criterion because of the Heartbeat Act. It was correctly assumed that the issue of abortion was

¹ After Dobbs, according to NYT, twenty-one states have banned or restricted women's access to abortion (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/us/abortion-laws-roe-v-wade.html>)

² This article is based on my BA thesis, which was finalized in 2022. Since then, a part of the study, focused on the "folk devil" (see Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Routledge Classics, 1972), has already been published in the journal of the 26th *Symposium of Students in English* in 2022.

³ Senate Bill Eight (SB8) or the Heartbeat Act, as it is known, will be explained in the historical background section.

vigorously debated in Texas at that time. The push for SB8 seemed to propel Texas into one of the dimensions Cohen states moral panics can exist: "where law can be created to regulate behavior" (qtd. in Critcher, 2013, p. 51). The other keywords, "pro-abortion," "pro-life," and "the Heartbeat Act," were used to ensure that the search would lead to pro-life media. It steered me to the websites of the previously mentioned advocacy groups. From there, the corpus was manually selected by scrolling down on the websites and saving those articles that seemed likely to contain elements of a moral panic style as they appeared.

The article aims to contribute to media discourse studies because, even though abortion was labeled "a source of great and bitter political conflict" (Gusfield 1981, p. 50) in the 1980s, to the best of my knowledge, this research is the first analysis of abortion as a public problem in the U.S. that draws upon a moral panic angle. Similar endeavors were undertaken by Zuk and Zuk (2019) regarding Poland and by Evans et al. (2004) regarding Australian society. However, in the U.S., it has yet to be scrutinized if specific institutional actors struggling to define the problem of abortion have employed a moral panic approach to delegitimize abortion. To clarify why abortion can be examined as a public problem from this perspective, it is necessary to briefly explain the terms *public problem* and *moral panic* and to present the historical context of abortion in the U.S.

2. Public problem, "ownership" of a public problem, moral panic

2.1. Public problem

Joseph Gusfield developed the *public problem* approach in the 1980s. The term refers to the emergence of a problem of common concern and relevance in the public sphere, through symbolic struggles that social and institutional actors engage in, struggles over visibility in defining it and, hence, in providing the solution(s) (Gusfield, 1981). Because this article will analyze advocacy and media discourse, the term "public problem" will be employed, but in some of the specialized literature, "social problem" is routinely used (see Ciocea, 2022, for an in-depth literature review on public problems). For the present purposes, the terms *public problem* and *social problem* can be understood as interchangeable. Public problems are constructed in discourse by at least two contradictory narratives set in motion by influential social and institutional actors (Gusfield, 1981; see also Goode & Ben Yehuda, 1994; Ciocea, 2022). The social constructionist perspective, also adopted here, implies that,

for the current analysis, what represents a problem for society takes shape from the discourses and positionings on the issue.

In this case, a primary condition for a situation to become a problem is for it to be regarded as painful (Gusfield, 1981). Nevertheless, not all situations considered painful "become matters of public activity and targets of public action" (Gusfield 1981, p. 3). Whether a problem is visible enough to be classified as public depends on "specific social-cultural circumstances, groups, categories, social structures, societies, historical eras, individuals and or classes" (Goode & Ben Yehuda, 1994, p.3). Public problems can be understood "as constructed phenomena – what constitutes a problem is the concern that segments of the public feel about a given condition" (Goode & Ben Yehuda, 1994, p. 149). As shown by Gusfield (1981, p. 9), public problems have "a cognitive side" and "a moral side." The latter "suggests a condemnable state of affairs from the perspective of someone's morality" (Gusfield, 1981, p. 9), which is a central dimension of the debates on abortion.

To inform society about the challenges that a specific issue poses and to legitimize a set of solutions, the social and institutional actors involved must assume and gain "ownership" over that issue (Gusfield, 1981). "Ownership" will enable their control of the narrative surrounding the problem, and this can lead to political influence and legislative control (Gusfield, 1981, p. 12). This article explores how pro-life advocates seek to define abortion as a public problem by amplifying its negative consequences with stylistic means originating in moral panic discourse. It considers the moral panic style to be used strategically as part of the symbolic struggles through which pro-life advocates attempt to establish "ownership" of the problem and take on "political responsibility" for solving it (for the connection between "ownership" and "responsibility", see Gusfield, 1981). A characteristic of the public debates on abortion in the U.S. is that pro-life advocates present both the problem and their responsibility, to a large extent, in moral terms.

2.2. "Ownership" of a public problem

Gusfield uses the concept of "ownership" to describe how the central position held by certain social and institutional actors regarding an issue is characterized, among other things, by "control and exclusiveness" (1981, p. 10) in defining and solving it. "Ownership" over a narrative attracts "public attention, trust, and influence" (Gusfield, 1981, p. 10). The "owners"

can present their "assertions of grievances" in the social arena. They may indicate the expected action to be taken in order to normalize the situation that does not fit their expectations of reality (Goode & Ben Yehuda, 1994, p. 151). When all these constituents align for a group of social players, that group has gained a position from which to impose as dominant their view of the problem (Gusfield 1981, p. 10). In this case, the group has the means through which their construction of reality about a particular issue can be said to define the public problem. As noted earlier, this also means that they "own" the solution(s) to the problem (in terms of policy-making).

By "owning" the public problem, social and institutional actors assume political responsibility for solving it, which may have a pronounced moral dimension, and, as a result, depending on the case, they are likely to use moral panic elements in their discourse. The moral perspective is represented by the disagreement a person feels between their sentiments about a specific situation and the reality they have filtered on a cognitive level. "It is that which enables the situation to be viewed as painful, ignoble, immoral. It is what makes alteration or eradication desirable or continuation valuable" (Gusfield, 1981, p. 9). From a linguistic perspective, a moral panic style may be employed by those seeking to "own" a public problem in order to undermine the benefits, delegitimize, and/or criminalize the issue. It is the premise of my article that the right-wing pro-life groups and media analyzed attempt to gain ownership of the narrative surrounding abortion by making use of moral panic discursive strategies⁴. I will explore and show how a moral panic scenario is activated in the corpus. The pro-life advocates' moral panic style is viewed here as a potentially significant contributing factor to the legitimization and passing of anti-abortion legislation, but not as its only cause.

2.3. Moral panic

The principal goal of moral panic research is to identify how the discourse of dominant social and institutional actors (e.g., the media, state officials, or celebrities) is made visible in the social arena. In the case of the moral panic paradigm, visibility is achieved by publicly displaying outrage toward negative, immoral behavior (Cricher, 2013), through the use of stylistic means rather than concrete factual evidence. In the case I analyze, those

⁴ Given the legislative outcome in Dobbs, it may be considered that they have succeeded at it.

seeking to “own” the public problem of abortion may display outrage for the purpose of achieving moral consent and regulation (Critcher, 2013). Moral regulation can afterward be used as a political enabler for creating legislation when passing the “responsibility” (Gusfield, 1981 p.13) for the public problem on to the courts.

In this article, the social and institutional right-wing players who seek to “own” the problem of abortion are expected to create, through the deployment of moral panic elements, a narrative in which “the social process of blaming [essential in the preservation of] moral solidarity and regulation” (Critcher, 2013, p. 45) is directed at legalized abortion. After constructing a morally tainted environment, they can signal that the “responsibility” for providing a solution lies with the state and federal judiciaries (Gusfield, 1981, p. 12). This can be argued to have happened with Dobbs. The emergence of moral panic in public discourse occurs during specific historical periods when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons” is labeled dangerous to what society holds morally valuable (Cohen, 2002). Detailing the historical background of abortion in the U.S. will clarify why the paper considers that this public problem was at the time of the analysis in a “specific condition” (Critcher, 2013) that also enabled the strategic use of a moral panic style.

3. Historical background

Abortion was legal in the U.S. until 1821. That year, Connecticut passed a law criminalizing it (Reagan, 2019). The legislation change went nationwide, but in the first decades after its promulgation, it did not prevent abortion from happening. According to Reagan, up until the 1930s, several abortion specialists in the United States openly advertised their practices and were well-known to local communities. Beginning with the 1940s and all the way through the 1950s, the U.S. prosecution department closed most clinics that had openly operated until then, consequently making “abortion [...] increasingly inaccessible and clandestine” (2019, p. 340). However, women “well connected enough” had the option to pay a psychiatrist who would testify for their “likely suicide” if abortion was denied (Reagan, 2019, p. 344). Others would travel to places such as “Japan, Sweden, or Puerto Rico” and have an abortion there (Reagan, 2019, p. 344).

When looking at these historical facts, it seems abortion remained a necessity that became more difficult to obtain. In this case, the legal discourse appears to hold more urgency

than the danger the act itself involves. The discourse shifted toward re-legalization after the 1960s. The traveling burden influenced "a majority of Americans to lean towards legalized abortion within some constrictions" (Greenhouse, 2011, p. 2037). Simultaneously, voting rights gave women a stronger voice in the abortion narrative. This whirlpool of events that occurred in the middle of the 20th century in the U.S. led to the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*. Through *Roe*, the U.S. "recognized a privacy interest in abortions." (Cornell, 2022 available online). The relevance of this is that through *Roe*, the U.S. Supreme Court basically decided that, in the case of abortion, the pregnant woman should be the only one who gets a say in whether the pregnancy should be terminated or not.

After the *Roe* decision, Republican party election strategists realized that politicizing abortion could attract suffragists who traditionally voted for the Democrats (Greenhouse, 2011). To attract them, the GOP needed to make its stance on abortion clear. They created the "pro-life action committee" (Greenhouse, 2011). As its name indicates, the pro-life action committee's purpose was to make it known that the GOP now fights against abortion rights and to ultimately end *Roe*. A Supreme Court case worth mentioning in the moral right-wing crusade for overturning *Roe* is *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. The 1992 *Casey* decision kept abortion legal and suggests that the Supreme Court at that point saw that interfering with a woman's pregnancy was an issue involving the latter's dignity (Siegel, 2008). The ruling convinced the GOP that anti-abortion strategies centered on the fetus only had little if any, chance of prevailing. "Those who would [promote] banning abortion now asserted that restrictions on abortion protect women's health and freedom and promote their informed consent" (Siegel, 2008, p. 1703).

With the new strategy in mind, the decision in a more recent Supreme Court Case, namely the 2007 *Carhart v. Gonzales*, may acquire a new nuance. For the purposes of this article, *Carhart*'s significance in the public discourse surrounding abortion resides in the fact that it enabled the Republican-supported *Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act* to remain in effect. My paper considers the partial-birth abortion act as an initial means through which stylistic strategies rather than concrete evidence influenced the moral and legislative foundation of the public problem of abortion in the U.S. The official website of the U.S. government defines the partial-birth abortion procedure as:

An abortion in which the person performing the abortion: (1) deliberately and intentionally vaginally delivers a living fetus until, in the case of a head-first presentation, the entire fetal head is outside the

mother's body or, in the case of a breech presentation, any part of the fetal trunk past the navel is outside the mother's body; and (2) performs the overt act, other than completion of delivery, that kills the partially delivered living fetus (Sen. Santorum, 2022).

As the reader can notice, there is a [complicated] political definition for the term. However, according to Gorney, "there is no [medical] textbook reference to any operative procedure or medical state called 'partial-birth.' The Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act regulates a medical procedure, but its roots lie in constitutional politics, not the practice of medicine. The term 'partial-birth abortion' was invented for the purposes of writing legislation" and has no medical correspondence (Gorney qtd. in Siegel, 2008, p. 1707). Even though it did not manage to criminalize abortion, when considering Gorney's explanation, it can be argued that Carhart was the first attempt to end abortion made by the pro-life side through the use of linguistic strategies rather than concrete (medical) evidence. Carhart's narrative can, for this reason, be considered to have paved the way for Texas' Senate Bill Eight.

3.1. Senate Bill Eight (SB8)

According to Graham, SB8 bans abortion as early as six weeks into a pregnancy. This is a time when most women do not even know they are pregnant. The narrative of the bill bases its draconic abortion restriction on the moment when a so-called "'fetal heartbeat' ⁵ is detected." In addition, to prevent abortion, SB8

invites lawsuits against anyone who performs or 'abets' an abortion. That could mean an array of people and groups, including clinics and their employees, from doctors to receptionists; friends, relatives, or strangers who pay for an abortion, including people who donate to or administer abortion funds; insurers that approve a claim; ride-share drivers who drive a patient to a clinic; and anyone who shares information about abortion options (2021).

The way SB8 is enforced leads to the assumption that stopping abortion is presented within the discourse that brought the bill into existence as a matter of individual or civic responsibility in society. This signals that the narrative of anti-abortion advocacy groups that

⁵ 'Fetal heartbeat' is a term coined by the pro-life side of the debate. It can be argued to have emotional impact and lead to moral panic instances, but just like 'partial birth', 'fetal heartbeat' has no medical correspondent (Graham 2021)

supported the bill might have utilized elements of moral panic to justify what seems to be a moral crusade. The crusade is identifiable within the context of the bill when it requires the citizens to take to court anyone "adding or abiding abortion." The right-wing media, in this instance, may attempt to vilify 'accomplices' of women seeking to terminate a pregnancy or encourage the full execution of the bill's prerogatives. In such a case, elements of moral panic are very likely to fit the needs of the pro-choice narrative.

4. The analytical framework: Identifying moral panic style elements

To identify discursive elements of the moral panic style, the article will examine the corpus by an analytical framework consisting of a combination of Fowler's approach to the "hysterical" style (1991), Cohen's (1972), Goode and Ben Yehuda's (1994) research on moral panics as symbolically constructed, Berlet's analysis of the U.S. "political religion" from a stylistic perspective (2008) and Charaudeau's view on legitimacy (qtd. in Amossy, 2005, p. 3). Fowler states that "hysteria" in the media (the concept he uses to refer to moral panic) can be identified through "terms denoting emotive reactions, always negative [orbiting] around the concepts of fear and confusion" (1991, p. 164). Examples of such words may include but are not limited to: "stress, danger risk, hazard" (1991, p. 164). Terms like "war and battle" are also identified by Fowler as being used for the purpose of inducing panic in the readers (1991).

If the media use a moral panic scenario, they may also up conjure "us" vs. "them" categories (Fowler, 1991). These are represented by those who follow the right path ("us") and those who cause the problem ("them"), including in moral terms. In addition to this dichotomy, when analyzing the construction of hysteria in media discourse, "a rhetoric of quantification" is likely to be employed (Fowler, 1991). Such rhetoric is represented by numerical and non-numerical quantity formulations that are expected to foster panic (e.g., thousands of dead people, millions wounded, etc.) (Fowler, 1991). One can also analyze what is left out of the text (Cohen, 2002). Cohen argues that giving all the facts can sometimes downplay the urgency of the solution's implementation (2002). His assertions resonate with Goode and Ben Yehuda's (1994). They claim that if a narrative contributes to a moral panic, it may express concern regarding society's proper functioning.

Another component that the article will add to the moral panic scenario is Berlet's dualism (2008). When analyzing extremist discourses, the "dualism" Berlet refers to signals a world divided into forces of "good and evil" (2008, p. 225). For the purposes of this article, the moral panic style incorporates such dualism when media discourse employs the "us vs them" dichotomies. Finally, the analysis will look at the legitimization of pro-life policy claims in the selected corpus. Charaudeau describes "legitimacy as the result of a recognition by others of what gives someone the power to do or say in the name of a status." (Charaudeau, qtd. in Amossy, 2005, p. 3). In the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, legitimacy is realized "through strategies that aim to show that the actions are consistent with the moral order of society, that is, with the system of laws, norms, agreements or aims agreed upon by (the majority of) the citizens" (Rojo and van Dijk, 1997, p. 528, qtd. in Amossy, 2005, p. 3). The reference to publicly shared norms and values is a vital source of legitimization (Rojo and van Dijk, 1997).

The paper considers that moral legitimization will be achieved in the corpus through moral panic stylistic elements used in the pro-life advocates' narrative. Based on the methodology presented, the paper will engage in the investigation of the corpus (articles and transcripts of Fox TV news) by first conducting a qualitative content analysis and then looking in depth at the moral panic stylistic elements discussed above. It will focus on key components of the narrative concerning the socially constructed public problem of abortion in the U.S. (see below). Visual discourse and nonverbal language, such as body movement or tone of voice, will not be part of the analysis.

The corpus will be analyzed with the help of Atlas.ti. This research software program allows qualitative coding and discursive categorizing of texts. In Atlas.ti, the texts in the corpus will be coded for content and assigned the specified discursive codes for identifying a moral panic style. The analysis is based on "deductive or theory-driven, as well as inductive or data-driven codes" (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 44; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The qualitative coding categories applied that will be discussed here are *beneficiaries/supporters of abortion* and *consequences*, as part of the presentation of the problem, and *hero*, *villain*, *victim*, as elements of the pro-life narrative of abortion. Discourse analysis from the perspective of a moral panic style will be further applied to these categories.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Beneficiaries/Supporters of abortion

For a moral panic to exist, someone must profit from and promote what other factions regard as "evil" for society. In Gusfield's terms (1981), they would be those morally and politically responsible for causing the problem. In the right-wing pro-life discourse, the articles in my corpus identify the beneficiaries/supporters of the abortion problem presented as twofold. On the one hand, RTL 1, 6, 7, Fox 4, 9, and TxV 10 display *the abortion industry's profit* as the main reason for legal abortion. Another justification for which the problem of abortion exists is presented on RTL 3, TxV 3, 10, Fox 2, 3, 4, 6, 5 as *the Roe vs. Wade decision*. Roe, as the reason for the problem's existence, signals that the legislation is unfounded and that the responsibility for the problem lies with the courts. If we link these categories with a moral panic scenario, the stylistic aspects presented in the analytical framework section can be noticed. They are used to portray those considered responsible for and benefiting from abortion in a way that is likely to induce shock, outrage, or other strong negative emotions:

Their [Planned Parenthood's] desperation to profit off of genocide has led them to attack our mere existence as an organization. [RTL 1]

They [the abortion industry] pretended they wanted abortions to be rare. They claimed they did not make a profit, they denied selling organs, and they [...] ignored the terrible impact and tragic impact on the most vulnerable families and the black family in particular [...] the abortion agenda is always more important. [Fox 4]

Texas children deserve to learn the truth about when Life begins and how valuable human Life is — both before and after birth. They deserve not to be told lies about abortion and the abortion industry [RTL 6]

What Planned Parenthood offers is an increasing market share of abortions in the United States. [TxV 10]

The abortion Mills are always after money [Fox 9]

... the 1973 decision of *Roe v. Wade* [which] forced abortion on demand onto the American public. [TxV 3]

Since this disastrous decision, an estimated 50 million unborn children have been killed [TxV10]

This is the legacy of *Roe v. Wade*: Judges catering to the abortion industry [RTL3]

Roe was a badly decided decision and had no constitutional grounding [Fox 2]

Roe vs. Wade has short-circuited the legal conversation about abortion. [Fox 4]

One of the online tools offers abortion as a viable option for teens facing pregnancy, intentionally mischaracterizing abortion as a 'safe' means of 'ending the pregnancy.' Texas children deserve to learn the truth about when Life begins and how valuable human Life is [TxV 10]

They [the abortion industry] denied they sold organs. [Fox 4]

A moral panic scenario is identifiable in the above extracts when considering the use of phrases/formulations such as "desperation to profit off of genocide," "abortion mills always after money," or "judges catering for the abortion industry." These are liable to induce shock. Emotions may be stirred because when claiming that *Roe v. Wade* "forced abortion on demand," was "badly decided or "short-circuit[ed] the legal conversation," the articles may plant the idea that what should be the moral 'norm' is not upheld. The corpus describes *50 million babies murdered*, which seems to be factual evidence but is not. Fifty million murdered babies, anyone would agree, is a tragedy, but it is important to note that the article was actually referring to what, in medical terms, were still embryos.

A moral panic scenario is also evident in the excerpt from Fox [4]. When finding out that the abortion industry is involved in the illegal organ trade, the listener could feel disgusted, enraged, or fearful, among other things. However, in no instance, does the T.V. anchor bring supportive evidence for his remark, making it pass for common knowledge. The presentation of such consequences without foundation in evidence may be classified as a moral panic feature. As a result, the pro-abortion side is painted as criminal and dangerous for U.S. society's proper functioning. In this case, the analysis can conclude that the pro-life narrative significantly based its moral delegitimizing of the *Roe* decision on moral panic stylistic strategies.

5.2. Villains and heroes

Findings in favor of the assumption that the pro-abortion side may be regarded as the villain in a moral panic scenario can be identified in the parts of the corpus comprised of the excerpts RTL 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, TxV 2, 3, 4, 9, 10 and Fox 4, 6, 7. It is worth mentioning that during my analysis of the corpus, several social and institutional actors were identified as portrayed in the right-wing narrative with traits that would classify them as villains. They were again twofold: the abortion industry (Planned Parenthood) and the Democrats. A theme that stood out when identifying the villains was that a moral crusade should be fought for the

sake of future generations. This goal is likely to give the moral high ground to the right-wing narrative regarding the public problem of abortion through stylistic means rather than factual evidence. The moral crusade has been observed in RTL 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, Fox 2, 8, 6, 9, TxV 1, 5:

Intentionally stopping a human heart is the definition of killing [Fox 6]

This life-or-death case should be dismissed [TxV 5]

Babies have been killed [Fox 2]

Pro-lifers are interested in promoting a pro-life culture and educating Texans about the miracle of Life [RTL 6]

Leading the Charge Abortion? Goliath, Planned Parenthood. [RTL1]

The good and evil of our country are going head to head. The outcome will affect *generations* of people. These attacks have taken an enormous toll on us, and we need your support to defeat them! We are fighting with our full might to defend the integrity of the Texas Heartbeat Act and the moms and babies the law protects. Now is the time for Pro-Life advocates to rally together. **Losing this battle is not an option.** [RTL 1]

In the above examples, Planned Parenthood is positioned as the aggressor "leading the attack." The image confers the assumption that Planned Parenthood plays the role of the main villain, or what Cohen (2002) calls the "folk devil" in the abortion scenario set by the pro-life discourse (see also Pîrciu, 2021). Also, an *us vs. them* dichotomy can be identified, taken to the extreme through the use of biblical characters and symbols. In the Bible, Goliath was defeated by David, the one chosen by God. The link with moral panic is made when realizing that 'we' in the dichotomy represents the 'good' or the morally adequate in society. In the selected extracts, the pro-life side presents banning abortion as a mission from God. This gives the issue a political-religious dimension (Berlet, 2008), further adding to the moral panic baggage of the corpus.

Hearing of a fight for integrity may probably cause emotional triggers to go off. One can assume from reading the excerpts above that society should attribute 'grave' importance to stopping abortion when RTL 1 emphasizes that *losing this battle is not an option* (written in bold – graphic highlight). The sentence in bold letters may give the reader a reason to linger over it and take the urgency of the battle as one of the main conclusions of the reading. The moral scenario is enforced in that extract when considering that it signals that "we," who represent "the good," have no choice but to engage in a battle for the sake of society's correct functioning. This imagined dichotomy in which the narrative seems to position society with

regard to abortion further solidifies the *Goliath* metaphor, linking the anti-choice agenda with a 'higher [moral] purpose.'

The excerpts give the reader clear indications that the pro-life side of the debate is morally righteous. This approach leads to the idea that God has chosen them and that the anti-choice side acts in accordance to a destined societal norm, holding the moral high ground. On the other hand, the pro-choice side can be identified here as morally deviant and as something that must be defeated, as *Goliath* was. Finally, by asking the reader to get actively involved ("we need your help"), they articles, it may be assumed, stress that stopping the (undefined) 'evil' from happening is a matter of individual responsibility. This could provoke guilt in the reader for standing by and doing nothing, which could be attributed to linguistic maneuvers and no evidence of the damage. In this case, the articles can be said to vilify the pro-choice side and condemn anyone who stands on the sidelines of this (constructed in narrative) 'battle.' The analysis also identified the pro-life scenario as the other side of the coin, the villains.

5.3. Victims

The analysis has further examined if the pro-life narrative developed what could be considered a *victim* of legal abortion in need of protection from the hero (the pro-life side). In this case, the research has identified mothers and/or babies as potential victims in the moral panic scenario set in motion within the narrative. They appear portrayed as in need of salvation in the following articles: RTL1, 2, 5, 6, 7, TxV 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10 and Fox 1, 2, 4, 6, 7. Most of these were identified as stressing an *us* vs. *them* relationship and pointing out the "we" side of the debate as the ones protecting "moms and babies," while the *them* category – typical for a moral panic scenario – was represented as the deviant attackers who seemed to have no mentionable positive qualities:

We are fighting with our full might to defend the integrity of the Texas Heartbeat Act and the moms and babies the law protects [RTL 1]

Abortion is the ultimate attack on women [Fox 8]

Since the moment Roe v Wade short-circuited the legal conversation about abortion, the abortion left has pretended... [Fox 4]

The above examples may be viewed as negatively emotionally charged, signaling that outlawing abortion is synonymous with the protection of some of the most vulnerable members of society. The fact that moms and babies need 'protection' suggests that abortion threatens them, perhaps even their wellbeing. Looking at it from afar, in a way, it resembles colonial discourse, as described by Spivak (1999), used by the oppressor to justify its subjection of the subaltern. In this case, the subaltern is represented through the concept of abortion, with mothers and children as the victims. RTL 6 and 10 can be interpreted as widening the range of victims by mentioning teenagers as also negatively affected. The article suggests this social category was tricked and manipulated by the abortion industry; RTL 10 does the same thing but for taxpayers:

Texas [teenagers] deserve to learn the truth about when Life begins and how valuable human Life is — both before and after birth. They deserve not to be told lies about abortion and the abortion industry. [RTL 6]

In 2011, legislation was passed that effectively defunded Planned Parenthood and all other abortion providers in Texas, making ours the seventh state to cut off the abortion provider from state-allocated funds. The bill redirects tens of millions in taxpayer funds to other organizations that provide medical services to poor women and bans counties from allocating taxpayer funds for abortion (Travis County and others had previously used public revenue to fund abortion services). [RTL 10]

By expanding the range of the victims to teenagers and taxpayers, the right-wing pro-life media and advocacy groups, it can be assumed, attempt to make readers feel directly affected by the "abortion industry" and portray it as threatening to society in general. I say this because most readers would probably be taxpayers or have someone in the family who is still a teenager. The use of adjectives such as "poor" or "truth," "innocent" or "vulnerable" could arouse strong emotions in readers and make them empathize with the pro-life discourse. These articles overall present the abortion industry as taking advantage of the weakest members of society, the "innocent children" and the "poor women" or "poor black families." The victims being "poor," "vulnerable" or "innocent" indicates that they most likely do not have the means to protect themselves and need safeguarding from the pro-life organizations. Thus, it may be said that the pro-life media and advocacy groups under scrutiny have developed a moral panic scenario. In this case, the analysis identifies American society presented as vulnerable and at the mercy of the evil abortion industry, hence a potential moral panic effect.

Another aspect worth noting regarding the victims is that none of the articles mention the medical term for the developing organism inside a woman's body at six or fifteen weeks. In medical discourse, "the fetal stage begins at the 11th week of gestation," and the developing organism is, at six weeks gestation, still an embryo (Bailey, 2022). One could argue a six-week embryo or 15-week fetus is a primitive organism, which may not be easily associated with a "baby" or "child." In this case, using descriptions such as "child" or "baby" for undeveloped organisms may be assumed to have the goal of emotionally loading the articles and creating a pessimistic vision of abortion. They also all speak of a beating heart. But all the articles fail to mention that at six weeks, in medical terms, the embryo has a "primitive heart" (Biga et al. 2022). This means that at six weeks an embryo develops valves that will, later on, grow to be a heart (Biga et al., 2022).

It is also relevant that according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the number of deaths per 100,000 abortions in the U.S. was 4 in 2013, 6 in 2014, 2 in 2015, 6 in 2016, 2 in 2017, and 2 in 2018⁶. The numbers give a 0.41 abortion mortality rate in the last five years (Hoyert, 2022). When looking at the number of maternal deaths in childbirth, the CDC website reveals they are much higher. For example, in 2018, the maternal mortality rate per 100,000 births was 17.4. In 2019, 20.1, and 2020 the rate was 23.8 (Kortsmitt et al., 2022). Thus, even though the pro-life discourse portrays abortion as dangerous to the mother, it seems that childbirth generates more female victims than abortion, another issue left out by the pro-life discourse. In this case, the omission of the maternal death rate can be considered a means through which the narrative employs moral panic tactics to morally delegitimize abortion by underlining its death toll, which can be considered a negative consequence of abortion.

5.4. Consequences

The consequences of the abortion industry's main goal to make money are recognized as morally and socially deviant. This is supported when the analysis identifies in the corpus "genocide" to be one of the principal consequences of abortion. This word alone, *genocide*, could have a strong negative emotional impact on most readers and may be labeled a moral

⁶ Data from 2020 and 2021 had, at the time the article was written, yet to be released because the CDC counts in 5-year intervals from 1973.

panic element. Its use might conjure up the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany in the readers' minds and make them associate abortion with these. Even if this link is not made, the meaning of genocide, "the deliberate killing of a mass group of people" (Oxford English Dictionary), may be enough to cause panic and provide a moral high ground for the pro-life narrative. Also, the analysis does not identify factual support for the use of genocide besides the word's meaning and stylistic value. Below are examples of where the consequences of abortion are exemplified throughout the corpus:

Their [Planned Parenthood's] desperation to profit off of genocide. [RTL 1.]

Tragically, many in our culture view life as disposable [TxV10]

Babies have been killed [Fox2]

the killing of a preborn child through abortion after there is a detectable heartbeat [...] can face a civil lawsuit. [...] " [RTL 2]

Intentionally stopping a human heart is de definition of killing" (Fox 6 when discussing abortion)

Women are encouraged by the abortionist lobby to boast about killing their children [Fox6]

Human life is a precious gift that we believe begins at conception and ends at natural death. Tragically, many in our culture view life as disposable." [TxV 10]

since Roe[the reason] 62 million, 62 million babies have been killed [fox 2]

Around 150,000 people marched in the freezing cold last week at the March for Life, in honor of the more than 63 million babies who have been killed by abortion since Roe v. Wade. [TxV10]

The use of constructions such as "[they] view life as disposable" or "[the others] engage in the killing of preborn children" displays how the articles present the consequences of abortion by drawing upon the semantic areas of waste and crime. These constructions can be interpreted as contributing to a moral panic scenario. The reader may feel disgusted and/or enraged by semantic nuances through which the consequences are detailed and, as a result, they can be more inclined to support pro-life policy measures. Other examples of syntactic and lexical constructions that may be understood as possibly inducing the reader to feel disgusted by the consequences abortion provokes are: "the killing thorough abortion" or "intentionally killing [through abortion]," and "intentionally stopping a human heart" [through abortion]. It could be said that the examples attempt to shock by presenting the idea that another consequence of abortion is people aiding and abetting killing (see section 3.1.).

These features, coupled with the rhetoric of quantification, are taken as satisfactory evidence that a moral panic scenario is at play. The rhetoric of quantification is present in TxV

10, Fox 2, and RTL 10 to make the consequences of legal abortion seem disturbing. The repetition of 62 million in the Fox transcript may be employed with the intent to shock the reader because of the massive number of "babies" that have been "killed." The repetitions may lead to a higher moral positioning of the anti-choice narrative against pro-choice policies. In this case, numbers may become symbols for the 'injustices' or even crimes committed by the pro-choice side, propelling the opposing narrative into a villainous stance.

6. Conclusion

Because my corpus consists of 30 articles, only two advocacy groups and one mainstream media outlet, to generalize and assume the findings apply to the right-wing media overall would be a stretch. For them to be broadened, the research should be expanded to incorporate more articles from more diverse right-wing media outlets. Nevertheless, the exploratory analysis has proved fruitful in showing how a moral panic style is strategically used in the texts selected, for the purpose of morally elevating the narrative of pro-life advocates and enabling them to own the public problem of abortion in the U.S., including the main solution of criminalizing it. However, a more in-depth analysis of the pro-life discourse for further validation and an inspection of if and how the left-wing media also employ elements of moral panic in their coverage of abortion restriction is worth further investigation.

All in all, the analysis of the selected corpus illustrates a moral panic scenario around the public problem of abortion in the narrative controlled by the pro-life media. It shows that abortion is presented in morally negative, hyperbolic terms that are usually not grounded in accurate factual and scientific evidence. The abortion industry is identified as a negative force that corrupts society and whose influence has led to what are described as faulty judicial decisions like Roe or Casey. The consequences thereof are displayed as millions of babies (which are actually fetuses) being killed. This leads to the conclusion that the anti-choice discourse feeds on a moral panic scenario in which abortion is labeled as deviant behavior to delegitimize the pro-choice side and foster panic.

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ANNEX

From Texas Right to life:	Access date/hour:
https://texasrighttolife.com/biden-urges-supreme-court-to-stop-texas-heartbeat-act/	21.11.21 /08:35
https://texasrighttolife.com/we-are-under-attack/	21.11.21/ 08:40
https://texasrighttolife.com/breaking-federal-judge-blocks-texas-heartbeat-act/	21.11.21/08:45
https://texasrighttolife.com/house-democrats-pass-radical-abortion-bill-rebuking-texas-heartbeat-act/	21.11.21/09:01
https://texasrighttolife.com/texas-heartbeat-act-regains-full-effect-per-appeals-court/	22.11.21/ 08:40
https://texasrighttolife.com/texas-education-board-considers-pro-abortion-curriculum-for-public-schools/	22.11.21/ 10:00
https://texasrighttolife.com/lyft-donates-1-million-to-abortion-group-after-texas-heartbeat-act-takes-effect/	23.11.21./08:45
https://texasrighttolife.com/supreme-court-examines-abortionists-bidens-legal-attacks-on-the-texas-heartbeat-act/	23.11.21./09:00
https://texasrighttolife.com/olympic-champion-sanya-richards-ross-says-abortion-decision-brought-her-to	23.11.21/10:00

the-depths-of-despair/	
https://texasrighttolife.com/naacp-to-boycott-texas-because-of-pro-life-laws/	23.11.21/10:05
From Texas Values:	
https://txvalues.org/pro-life	25.11.21/08:45
https://www.societyofstsebastian.org/summer2021-tx-heartbeat-grossu-saenz	25.11.21/09:05
https://txvalues.org/biden-v-babies-2-0-biden-attacks-heartbeat-law-again-through-fake-political-lawsuit/	25.11.21/10:00
https://txvalues.org/release-texas-heartbeat-law-makes-history-as-it-takes-effect/	26.11.21/08:45
https://txvalues.org/breaking-supreme-court-victory-texas-heartbeat-law-passes-judicial-test/	26.11.21./10:15
https://txvalues.org/breaking-texas-heartbeat-law-federal-court-hearing-today-after-two-scotus-victories/	27.01.21/08:03
https://txvalues.org/texasvaluesmarchforlife2022/	27.01.21/09:00
https://txvalues.org/breakingheartbeatlawattexasupremecourt/	06.02.22/08:00
https://txvalues.org/14496-2/	26.03.21./09:05
https://txvalues.org/texas-heartbeat-law-beats-strongly-inspires-other-states-to-follow-suit/	25.02.21/ 09:00
https://txvalues.org/major-update-pro-life-heartbeat-bill-gets-filed-set-for-hearing-in-texas-senate/	23.03..21/09:00
From Fox News:	
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZVMGtPdMFw	01.10.21/09:00
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=too4XuC7fLw	01.10.21/09:30
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8qrolk612M	15.10.21/11:00
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4eLwceKtpg	17.10.21/08:00
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAHVpIj5beI	17.10.21/08:51
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGGYnxjGaYY	18.10.21/09:23
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0fDahfnvTg	07.12.21/08:33
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxbemQviryI	08.12.21/09:00
https://www.foxnews.com/us/texas-abortion-private-enforcement-court-ruling	27.04.22/ 15:00

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