

# Changing Perceptions of Reproductive and Sexual Health: A Qualitative Content Analysis of the *New York Times* (1960 vs. 2020)

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## Abstract

Popular approaches to and understandings of reproductive and sexual health have changed greatly over the course of history. The changing quality of our collective perceptions of these topics is largely owed to the way in which news sources frame issues involving reproductive and sexual health. Comparing *New York Times* articles published in 1960 to those published in 2020, this research aims to analyze the role the media plays in framing certain practices involved in the maintenance of reproductive and sexual health and the claim of one’s bodily autonomy, as well as how this role has changed over time. Findings of this research suggest that the approach the media has taken in reporting on issues of reproductive and sexual health has progressed within this 60-year span, growing away from the application of a negative connotation to these issues, which aimed to hinder their relevance, and adopting a more educational and informational approach, which, instead, highlights their relevance. By doing so, we gain a greater understanding of how certain practices become aligned with or separated from widely accepted illustrations of reproductive and sexual health, and how popular discourse surrounding topics of sex has evolved.

## Introduction

- Popular understandings of what the picture of reproductive and sexual health looks like has changed significantly over time.
- Much of this change is owed to news sources which are responsible for the distribution of information relating to the historical contexts their articles and headlines are written and published within.
  - The language used within these headlines and articles is specially curated to incite reactionary responses from the consumer, often related to panic fear excitement and/or curiosity.
  - These institutions benefit from the dramatization of social issues within a capitalist society, and the evolving social standards of recent history can be attributed to these platforms devoted to the publication and distribution of information.
  - The societal influence of these sources is pervasive to the degree that their publications often influence public opinion, norms, and policy.
  - News sources play a key role in the emergence of public opinion, serving as agenda setters which determine what information is distributed to the public, as well as how it is framed.
- This research addresses how societal standards of reproductive and sexual health have changed over the course of the 60-year period between 1960 and 2020, and how New York Times articles from each of those years have contributed to this change. Additionally, this research addresses how the language used in popular headlines and articles are representative of a larger social context.
- The distinction drawn between these periods of time is significant. The year 1960 marks a turning point in popular discussion of reproductive and sexual health, as well as bodily autonomy, with the FDA’s approval of the first oral contraceptive. The year 2020, on the other hand, serves as a representation of modern perspectives surrounding topics of reproductive and sexual health.

## Research Question

- How has the media, specifically the publications of the *New York Times*, evolved in their approach to issues of reproductive and sexual health between 1960 and 2020?
- How is the distinction drawn between these two time periods representative of the larger societal contexts these publications were produced within?

## Methods

- This research focuses on headlines and articles published by the *New York Times* during the 14th week of the years 1960 and 2020.
- These articles are accessible through the *TimesMachine*, a browser that offers digital replicas of all issues of the paper, ranging from 1851 to 2002, and the *New York Times Article Archive*, which provides partial and full-text digital versions of articles from 1851 to today.
- Follows a method of constructed week sampling in order to develop a point of comparison between both years.
- The number 14 was produced by a random number generator ranging from 1 to 52, used for selecting one week out of the year for analysis.
  - The 14th week of 1960 ranges from April 4th to April 10<sup>th</sup>
  - The 14th week of 2020 ranges from April 6th to April 12<sup>th</sup>
- The articles selected for analysis have been filtered within the *TimesMachine* and the *New York Times Article Archive* based on publication date.
- The data falling between the relevant dates of publication are further filtered based on the topic at hand.
  - This research filters for the terms: “sex”, ”reproductive health”, “sexual health”, “pre-marital sex”, “venereal disease”, and “birth control”.
- Each piece incorporated within this research serves as a characterization of the sexual norms relevant to the political, social, and economic environment of each represented era and is further contextualized through connection with significant policies and popularized situations of the time period.
- Publications of the *New York Times* were selected for analysis because the source is generally considered to be both reliable and accessible. This source has a rich and lengthy history, beginning in 1835 and reporting on many major historical events. Furthermore, the source is consistently well circulated and commonly used in social science research.

## Results

### 1960 Findings

- Perceived Rise in Rates of Sex Outside of Marriage:
- Article #1:
  - “Professor Ousted For His View On Sex”, published on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1960
    - Discusses the dismissal of Leo F. Koch, a Biology professor at the University of Illinois.
    - Koch was dismissed for expressing his belief that pre-marital sexual relationships should be condoned in print.
    - The article states “A letter by Mr. Koch, published in The Daily Illini, student newspaper, on March 18, had expressed offensive views contrary to standards of morality.”
- Article #2:
  - “Syphilis Rise is Noted, U.S. Expert Tells of ‘Alarming’ Increase of 42 Per Cent”, published on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1960
    - Discusses a rise in rates of Syphilis infection in the United States.
    - The article states “Cases of infectious syphilis in the United States showed an increase of 42 pr cent in the last half of 1959 over the like period of 1958, a Federal expert said today.”
- Condemnation of Birth Control and its Use
- Article #3:
  - “Queens Defended By 22 Of Faculty”, published on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1960
    - Discusses charges of anti-Catholic bias filed against a student newspaper, *The Phoenix*, at Queens College following the publication of an article on birth control.
- Article #4:
  - “Goals for India”, published on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1960
    - Article written in response to the notion that birth control could be the solution to economic issues of other countries, such as India.
    - Describes birth control use as “morally wrong, and against God’s law.

## 2020 Findings

Sexual Education and Safety Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Article #1:
  - “Sex and the Coronavirus: Reader Questions, Answered”, published on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020
    - Centered on answering questions readers have submitted regarding the navigation of sexual relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic.
    - Begins by stating, “Last week, we asked for your questions about sex and the coronavirus. You had many.”
    - Provides readers with informative answers on balancing the minimization of risk with their sexual relationships.
- Article #2:
  - “The Year Sex Work Came Home”, published on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020
    - Discusses how sex workers have maintained their income while minimizing their exposure to the coronavirus.
    - Represents the voices of several sex workers, but includes the words of one, specifically, who states, “The idea that all sex workers make a lot of money is not true — or that we’re just simply just showing our bodies and we have no integrity, and we have no brain behind us,... It’s really so much more than that. We’re all people.”
- Affirmation of Reproductive Rights
- Article #3:
  - “Red States are Exploiting Coronavirus to Ban Abortion”, published on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020
    - Discusses the blocking of abortions and closure of clinics in Texas by Governor Greg Abbott.
    - The article declares that “Governors argue that they’re banning abortion to conserve resources for the pandemic, but they’re ensuring that more people expose themselves to the coronavirus.”
- Article #4:
  - “Fight Over Texas Abortion Ban Reaches Supreme Court”, published on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020
    - Discussed the dispute between the Texas government and Texas abortion providers over the constitutionality of the abortion ban.
    - A subheading of this article states “State officials say the pandemic requires restricting abortions, while clinic say the state is cynically using the crisis to achieve longstanding goals.”

## Conclusion

- The approach the *New York Times* has adopted in addressing topics involving reproductive and sexual health has evolved considerably.
- The articles published in 1960 attach a negative connotation to the discussion of reproduction and sex in the public sphere, using condemnatory language and terms in destabilizing those who engage in pre-marital sex and/or use oral contraception.
- The articles published in 2020 represent the development of an educational and informative approach to issues of reproductive and sexual health. These articles serve in affirming the body autonomy of the public by promoting safe sex and the right to an abortion, as well as normalizing highly stigmatized occupations of sex workers.

## References

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