

# Framing abortion in the media

A case study of the coverage of the 2013 Wendy Davis Filibuster

By

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Honors Thesis

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## Statement

The project undertaken is an analysis of potential media bias regarding newspapers' coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster in 2013. This study seeks to answer the question: "Are the media biased in use of terms regarding abortion?"

Grounded in framing theory, this study uses textual analysis to review the terms different newspapers use in their coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster. Three newspapers are examined: *The Austin American-Statesman*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*.

The researcher reviews news stories related to the Wendy Davis filibuster during the 2013 Texas legislative session. On June 25, 2013, Sen. Davis filibustered in attempt to stop a bill that would increase restrictions to abortion. The filibuster provided news outlets with numerous opportunities to write about abortion (with attendant terminology), so the researcher finds this to be a useful sample. The clips range from June 19 through August 30, 2013.

The researcher selected three total newspapers: one local Texas newspaper, and two newspapers with national impact. The newspapers with national impact, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*, demonstrate two positions on the political spectrum, respectively liberal and conservative.

This study is important to the media community, as well as to media consumers. It is important for journalists and consumers of the media to understand where media bias is occurring, where it is not occurring and how to address it.

In 1986 the AP Stylebook, the main source that dictates style for print journalists, changed recommendations regarding abortion. It moved from using the term "pro-life" to "anti-abortion" and went from "pro-abortion" to "pro-choice."

Many media organizations, however, reject these terms, and pick ones that reflect the views of their organization. This researcher examines how these chosen terms are used in the context of the news articles they are used in.

## Introduction

The media have long fielded debates about bias, particularly regarding hot-button political issues. Critics have accused the media of showing bias in political elections, such as favorably reporting on one candidate but not the other. The media overwhelmingly backed Barack Obama in the 2008 election, some critics claim (Galoozis). Conflict among countries also stirs up claims of bias. During the Gaza conflict of 2014, some media outlets were accused of being pro-Israeli, while others were accused of being pro-Palestinian (Schumacher-Matos). A 2012 Pew Research study found that the number of Americans who believe there is a great deal of political bias in the media is growing. In 1989, 25 percent of Americans told Pew they see a “great deal” of political bias. In 2012, this percent has increased to 37 percent (“Perceptions of Bias, News Knowledge”).

One of the issues that receive a great deal of attention in the recent media is abortion. This study attempts to investigate the media bias in abortion coverage. As media outlets are accused of being partisan, they are also accused of taking sides on this issue. The watchdog organization Accuracy in Media claims media outlets are biased in favor of the pro-abortion and pro-choice positions on abortion (Kincaid).

Bias can be measured in a variety of ways. Some researchers choose to look at what stories media outlets choose to cover. Covering a story, or failing to cover a story, can indicate bias, suggested by gatekeeping theory. The news outlets acts as a gate, determining what information will pass through the gate and be covered (Shoemaker et al.). Agenda setting theories also show that the media has a part in deciding what issues should be important to society. By choosing certain quotes or speaking to certain people, the media can show bias (Scheufele and Tewksbury 11).

Newspapers, though often accused of bias, do not obviously take sides in their news coverage. News coverage is separate from editorial coverage, which may take a side. However, Druckman and Parkin suggest that editorial coverage could influence news coverage (1048). Even if this is true, news coverage does not explicitly choose a side to favor. Therefore, bias most likely exists through terminology, perhaps subconsciously. Therefore, bias can be analyzed through an examination of the terms media outlets use, a theory called framing (11-12).

Framing studies are widely used to examine media content. For example, Allen et al. suggests that, in part, media framing was responsible for the overwhelming public support of the Gulf War, even though there were a large group of people against the war. Patriotism, technology, and military jargon were continually framed by the media to favor the U.S. position (283). Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley studied framing of civil liberties issues surrounding the hate group Ku Klux Klan. The study showed that the public was more tolerant of KKK rallies when the issue was framed as a freedom of speech issue rather than a public order issue (572).

The researcher will analyze the terms surrounding abortion, because they are hotly contested. The Wendy Davis filibuster of 2013 is a significant event that forced the media to choose terms regarding abortion. The event brought people on both sides of the abortion debate into opposition with each other. After this event, most people, even those who did not follow Texas politics, knew who Davis was. Davis became a central rallying figure for those in favor of abortion. This event is significant because it was reported on by both national and local news outlets, and study of both local and national outlets provide insight into the diversity of terms surrounding abortion used by the media.

## Background

In 1986, *The Associated Press Stylebook*, the primary source provides style rules for newspapers around the country, changed its guidelines on abortion terms. Previously, they used the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice” to represent opposing points of view on the subject of abortion. In 1986, the terms changed to anti-abortion and pro-abortion (“Language Evolves”: The AP Stylebook during the Last 30 Years.”). In the 2013 AP Stylebook, pro-abortion rights now replaces pro-abortion.

Newspapers such as *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* avoid words such as “pro-life” and “pro-choice” because they believe these words became common by the clever word choice of advocates on each side of the political spectrum. In order to stay neutral, these papers choose terms like “anti-abortion” and “abortion rights advocate” (Shepard).

*The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* explains its reasoning for abortion-terminology choices within the text of the book, whereas the *AP Stylebook* does not. *The New York Times* says: “The political and emotional heat surrounding abortion gives rise to a range of polemical language” (Siegal and Connolly 5). The guide cites “abortion rights advocate” and “anti-abortion campaigner” as “impartial terms,” and claims “anti-abortion” is an “undisputed modifier” (Siegal 5).

However, not everyone believes term “anti-abortion” is impartial. The conservative blog Red State believes the prefix “anti-” shows clear bias to those parties who support abortion rights. Blogger Leon H. Wolf writes about the AP style book’s decision: “In the first place, they've done a great ‘framing’ favor to the pro-choice side by casting the pro-lifers as the ‘anti-’ side in the debate” (Wolf).

Scholarly sources have come to a similar conclusion. Kenneth L. Woodward, writing for the Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy, brings up the distinction between the



prefix “anti-” and the connotation of rights. He points out a 1985 *Los Angeles Times* study that found 82 percent of journalists support abortion rights, and he finds a connection between the chosen neutral language of journalists and their opinions: “Even here, of course, there is a hidden bias: ‘abortion rights’ advocates are *for* something, ‘anti-abortion’ advocates are *against* something. But these labels are about as fair as language will allow” (428).

Marvin Olasky, the author of “The Press and Abortion, 1838-1988,” offers an additional perspective. Olasky is the editor-in-chief of WORLD Magazine (“Marvin Olasky”), whose mission statement reads “To report, interpret, and illustrate the news in a timely, accurate, enjoyable, and arresting fashion from a perspective committed to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God” (“About Us”). According to WORLD, the magazine does not support any political party but is against abortion.

In “The Press and Abortion,” Olasky explores the history of how the press has dealt with the topic of abortion. The book, published in 1988, brings up the problem of terms. Although Olasky is clearly against abortion, he seeks to create fair dialogue about the issue. Reviewers have chronicled his achievement of this goal. In a 1989 edition of “Journalism History,” Phyllis Zagano of Boston University writes that Olasky has reported a history in which editorial and ad positions have changed throughout the years (49). Zagano concludes: “On the whole, Olasky shows how newspapers have changed their points of views relative to abortion, from seeing it as a dreadful crime (while at the same time winking at the fact of abortion ads in their columns) to viewing it as an inherent right of women” (50).

Deciding on terms is problematic for Olasky. He says in his introduction:

I have tried to be fair to both sides in terminology, and that means I may anger both sides. Language helps to define what is moral and honorable, and for that reason both sides in

the abortion battle have tried to grab the high ground: ‘pro-choice’ and ‘pro-life.’ The subject of this book, however, is abortion, and the debate is between those who favor abortion in several or all circumstances and those who oppose it; I teach my children and students that it is better to be specific than vague, and for that reason, with the likelihood of angering both sides, I use the terms *pro-abortion* and *anti-abortion* rather than *pro-life* and *pro-choice*” (Olasky xiii).

Olasky chose terms that seem to find a middle-ground between the options. However, as he notes, the disadvantage to this method is that neither side feels fairly represented.

On June 25, 2013, a special session of the Texas legislature was called. One of the bills to be voted on was Senate Bill 5. The bill called to issue several abortion procedures. In Texas, women were barred from getting an abortion 28 weeks after their pregnancy. If passed, the bill would change that ban to 20 weeks after pregnancy. The bill also required all pregnancy centers to meet the standards of an outpatient hospital, be within 30 minutes of a hospital, and have a physician from that hospital on staff. These requirements jeopardized the existence of many abortion clinics throughout Texas (Janish 3-4), as only five of the 42 abortion clinics in Texas would be able to stay open (Fernandez). The bill drew protest from groups who wanted to protect abortion (Janish 3-4).

Sen. Wendy Davis was among the group opposing the bill. At about 11:18 a.m., Davis began to filibuster the bill. According to Texas legislative tradition, those participating in filibusters must stand, not lean on anything, and stay on topic. Breaking any of these rules three times could lead to the end of the filibuster (Fernandez).

The first strike came when Davis began speaking about how the 2011 Texas legislature cut money from family-planning services in Texas. Sen. Robert Nichols said it was off topic

from the matter of abortion Davis was supposed to be speaking about, and the strike was ruled against Davis. The second strike followed 45 minutes after Sen. Rodney Ellis assisted Davis in putting on her back brace. The third came at 9:31 p.m., when Davis was accused of going off subject again. At 10:03 p.m., it was ruled as a strike. The audience in the room protested, and for the next two hours, Democratic senators tried to continue the filibuster. Ultimately, the bill passed a few days later (Davis).

In this study, the researcher examines coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster of 2013, an event in the media that required use of these debated terms. The researcher examines the use of these terms and performs a textual analysis to answer the question: “Are the media biased in use of terms regarding abortion?”

#### Literature Review

In the past decade, multiple studies have been done on bias in the media, and many of these studies come to different conclusions. In a 2005 study by Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, researchers compared the political leanings of news outlets to the political leanings of politicians. Their study compared the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) scores of politicians, and computed an ADA score for a news outlet. The score takes into account the number of times a news outlet cited a particular think tank in their stories (Groseclose and Milyo 1191). They found that the majority of news outlets lean more liberal than the average member of Congress. The only two media organizations that leaned right were *The Washington Times* and *Fox News' Special Report with Brit Hume* (1192).

Brendan Nyhan, media critic and political scientist at Dartmouth College, argues that the findings of Groseclose's study are based on a false assumption. He says in his blog:

In short, the underlying assumption is that, if the press is unbiased, then media outlets will cite think tanks in news reporting in a fashion that is "balanced" with respect to the scores assigned to the groups based on Congressional citations. Any deviation from the mean ADA score of Congress is defined as "bias." But is that a fair assumption (Nyhan)?

Other studies have found that accusations of liberal media bias come from conservative politicians. One study suggests that because the news media is likely to publish accusations of media bias, accusing the media of bias allows the conservative politician to favorably control their message (Domke 54). Whenever an issue is polarized, claims of bias arise. The hostile media phenomenon, suggested by a study in 1985, says that people believe the media are biased against their side. After reviewing coverage of the Beirut massacre, both pro-Israelis and pro-Arabs believed the coverage was biased against them (Vallone et al 577).

Studies apply Vallone's research to the conservative-liberal spectrum in the United States. People on both sides of the spectrum are likely to believe the media are biased against them (Lee 54). According to Lee's study, the charge that the media have a pro-liberal bias may stem from political cynicism, or distrust in the government and media, and Republicans trusting other Republicans who claim the media is biased against them (55).

Polarizing issues are not simply colored by the media outlet covering them. Studies have shown how politically-charged groups vie for media coverage. They develop frames in which to talk to the public and the media. Rohlinger studied two opposing groups that form discussion around abortion: the National Organization for Women and Concerned Women for America, for and against abortion, respectively (470). Both of these organizations use frames to package their message. NOW uses the idea that women should be able to choose abortion; abortion is their "right" (487). Using this "rights" frame, NOW discusses the failure of American society to

provide women with the ability to be able to obtain an abortion safely and legally. Frames change over time as the discussion changes. Before 1988, NOW focused on attacking people opposed to abortion. NOW equated people against abortion with people who performed terrorist actions and violence at abortion clinic sites (488).

CWA also framed their message. Believing in unchanging moral absolutes, CWA has not changed its message over time. Many of CWA's frames revolve around the sanctity of life, and the beginning of life at conception (492). Like NOW, CWA uses an "American failure" frame, but the failure is different this time: it is a failure to protect life (493).

Framing abortion as a "right" is a common theme throughout feminist theory. The ability to have access to a legal abortion has been equated by those who ascribe to feminist theory as a fundamental right for women. Henderson reasons that because the pregnancy of a woman is caused by another human, she is only treated as full human if she is able to make the choice to end that pregnancy. She says:

Even with adoption as a possible choice once the baby is born, forcing women to become pregnant and carry a pregnancy to term against their own decisions is a denial of a woman's full human status, because someone else has determined she must give her life and her body to another human being—presumably because they doubt her full human capacities as a moral and competent decision maker (Henderson 148).

Theorists have taken the "rights" frame even further and labeled it the "War on Women." This frame claims that social conservatives are performing a war on women by denying them their necessary rights and name-calling women who defend those rights (Gilman 2).

A common frame for groups opposed to abortion to use is one of fetus personhood. Like CWA, these groups equate a fetus as human. Imagery and terms are used to call the fetus a

“baby” (Halva-Neubauer and Zeigler 110). A new frame is also present in anti-abortion discussions, one that theorists call the “pro-woman, pro-life” frame. This frame views abortion through the lens that it is harmful to women. According to theorists, women only choose abortion because they are coerced by another party—such as parents, boyfriends, sexual partners or friends. They argue that these women suffer physical and emotional harm as a result of the abortion (Trumpy 165). The rise of organizations identifying as “pro-life feminists” also adds to the frame that anti-abortion action is pro-women. These groups suggest that not only does abortion harm women, but it also targets them. Abortion is murder of a fetus, and many of these fetuses are of a female gender (Ziegler 234). Other organizations, such as Live Action, expose corruption in pro-abortion groups such as Planned Parenthood to demonstrate the abortion-industry is not in favor of women (235).

These organizations use tactics to get themselves into the media. The “rights” frame used by pro-abortion groups is a response to the importance that American society places on rights. The “pro-women, pro-life” frame is a response to the claim that a “war on women” is taking place through policies that restrict abortion. In order to get the attention of the media, these organizations try to align their message to confront the newsworthy issues of the day. These groups also hold press conferences and try to legitimize themselves in the eyes of journalists. Because journalists use beats to report on a certain field, finding a “legitimate” source of information is a goal of the journalist, and ultimately, can influence the framing of the issue in the news (Rohlinger 538).

### Statement of Anticipated Results

This research anticipates the answering the question “Are the media biased in terminology regarding abortion?” The question of media bias draws great interest in the field of media research. Multiple studies have been conducted to investigate media bias and framing, but the conclusions are often conflicting. The researcher plans to examine the question through a textual analysis of the Wendy Davis filibuster in 2013. By reviewing news articles, counting the number of times specific terms are used, and considering the frames used, the researcher will attempt to add to the body of knowledge about media bias.

### Methodology

This study performs a textual analysis of news articles surrounding the Davis filibuster, using the theoretical concept of framing. To define framing, the researcher looks to the work of Robert Entman. Entman says: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (52). While frames can help the reader to understand the text better, their understanding of the frames may not be what the journalist intended them to conclude from the text. When journalists use frames, they make decisions that are either conscious or subconscious, guided by their beliefs (52).

This study considers how newspapers use frames when reporting on Davis’ filibuster and the issue of abortion. Three newspapers have been selected for study: *The Austin American-Statesman*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*. *The Austin American-Statesman* offers a local perspective of the Texas legislature. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times* offer a national perspective of the event and how it relates to the national conversation on

abortion. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*' news coverage slants on opposite sides of the political spectrum, according to a 2005 study by Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo (Groseclose and Milyo 1212).

In Lexis-Nexis, the researcher selected each of the newspapers individually under the "source" option. Using a custom search, the researcher made a date range of June 19-August 30, 2013. June was the month that the Texas legislature met. The case was most often referenced through the month of August.

The researcher used "Wendy Davis" as search terms. Any article written by the selected newspaper that references Davis within that time will appear. The researcher downloaded all the articles into Microsoft Word, and performed a search to find how many times key-words such as "pro-abortion rights," "pro-abortion," "pro-choice," "pro-life," and "anti-abortion" were used. These results were recorded. Then, the researcher analyzed the articles relevant to the filibuster and in discussion of abortion terms.

Because *The Washington Times* was not available on Lexis Nexis, the researcher used Google.com. Using the search terms "Wendy Davis site:washingtontimes.com" and the same date range, the researcher located articles from the paper.

During the textual analysis, the researcher took note of the most commonly-used terms regarding in abortion used by the newspapers. The researcher also considered where the words were located in the story. Terms located in the headline, lead, or high up in the story indicate a preference for that term. The researcher also considered if a word was located in a quote. Many style guides, including the *AP Stylebook* and *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*, allow journalists to use different words in a quote if their interviewee used that term (AP Stylebook 2, Siegal and Connolly 5).



The researcher looked to see if any frames are used. The way newspapers frame the debate could clearly indicate bias, even if it is unintentional. The words, and the context the words are used in, can set off framing. Then, the researcher recorded findings and documented them in Microsoft Word.

## Analysis

### The Austin American-Statesman

#### Introduction

The *Austin American-Statesman* is a daily newspaper in Austin, Texas—where Wendy Davis’ filibuster took place. According to the *Statesman*, 641,900 people in Austin read a printed edition of the *Statesman* each week. Each month, more than 4.4 million people visit the website each month (Statesman Solutions).

The researcher used Lexis Nexis to search for “Wendy Davis” between June 19, 2013 and August 30, 2013. Lexis Nexis pulled 80 articles from the *Austin American-Statesman*. Of these articles, 23 were appropriate for content analysis. Several of the articles pulled were letters to the editor, editorials and other opinion pieces that are not appropriate for the scope of this study. Of the 80 articles, here is a full list of terms regarding abortion used in the *Statesman* coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster.

Anti-abortion: 15

    Non-specific uses: 10

    Anti-abortion groups: 3

    Anti-abortion supporters: 1

    Anti-abortion activists: 1

Abortion opponents: 16

Pro-life: 8

Pro-lifers: 3

Right to life: 17

Right-to-life: 3

Pro-abortion: 1

Pro-choice: 6

Pro-choicers: 1

Abortion rights: 37

    Non-specific uses: 17

    Abortion rights advocates: 6

    Abortion rights supporters: 10

    Abortion rights groups: 2

Abortion rights activists: 2  
Women's rights: 8

In the *Statesman's* coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster, the paper used terms similar to those the *Associated Press* recommends. "Anti-abortion" was a common word used to describe people and policies against the practice of abortion. "Abortion opponents," a term not discussed by the *Associated Press Stylebook*, was also frequently used by *Statesman* reporters.

To describe people and policies in favor of abortion, the *Statesman* used "Abortion rights," diverging slightly from "pro-abortion rights" suggested by AP. The traditional terms discouraged by the AP were used sparingly, but still appeared in the text. "Pro-life" was used eight times, and "pro-choice" was used six times.

Many of the terms describing abortion used in the *Statesman* may have been in quotations. Newspaper stylebooks often allow discouraged words to be used in quotations. In the following section, the researcher will discuss how the terms were used in the context of the articles written on the Wendy Davis filibuster.

The researcher recognizes that the *Statesman* uses terms that some opposed to abortion may believe are biased. These objections were mentioned in the background section of this thesis. However, after analyzing *Statesman* coverage, the researcher concludes the *Austin American-Statesman* is overall unbiased in its coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster.

### Analysis

The Wendy Davis filibuster drew a strong contrast between two opposing views. Many people strongly favored Senate Bill 5, while others strongly opposed it. News outlets were faced with the dilemma of how to categorize both sides fairly. In many places where the *Statesman* had to categorize the both sides, the reporters were careful to avoid terms directly invoking opinions

on abortion. Often, the reporters would favor terms like “bill opponents” rather than “abortion opponents.” This helped the overall nature of the articles to be written a balanced way.

This tactic is illustrated in articles written early on in the date range. In the June 26 article “Abortion filibuster hit by GOP challenges,” the reporter uses the phrases “both sides” several times. In that same article, spectators are first categorized by the color of their T-shirts. Some spectators wore “orange T-shirts in a gesture of solidarity for abortion rights.” Others are described as “blue-clad abortion opponents.” Coverage later on continues to categorize spectators by the color of the clothing, leaving out the position of the spectators. The June 26 article, “Come Monday, it’s round 2,” avoids directly stating the positions of the protestors. It discusses spectators as people wearing “orange, the designated color for opponents of the bill.”

The July 9 article “Abortion testimony lasts into the night” speaks of the protestors in a similar way. The article says the Capitol was filled with “thousands of people on both sides of the debate.” The reporter classifies these people again by the colors of their shirts. The “opponents” were dressed in orange. Additionally, the article states what the protestors are doing, and allows the reader to determine what side they are on. Some people carried signs saying “keep your theology off my biology” and “keep your laws off my body,” the article said, rather than labeling the people as “abortion advocates.” The July 19 article “Perry, backers celebrate as abortion bill is signed” is even more descriptive about the actions of people. Bill protestors are called “black-clad, coat hanger-wielding protesters,” rather than simply referring to them as “abortion activists.”

The *Statesman* often refers to commonly-held partisanship to explain the sides of the debate. In the June 28 article “Session’s wild finish nets zero results,” split the sides between the

GOP and Democratic House members. The Democratic House members represented those who opposed the bill, and the GOP represented those who were in favor of the bill.

The July 13 article “Senate passes abortion bill after intense debate” refers to audience members not by the stance on abortion, but rather by their stance on the bill. The protestors are called “bill opponents” rather than “abortion rights supporters.” Those opposed to abortion are also characterized by their stance on the bill rather than their stance on abortion, as the July 19 article “Perry, backers celebrate as abortion bill is signed” calls them “bill supporters.”

The paper uses terms such as “pro-life” and “pro-choice” a few times throughout its coverage; however, these phrases are used only direct quotations, or in reference to the name of an organization. For example, the group Pro-Choice Texas is mentioned in the June 28 article “Galvanized groups set for abortion sequel.”

Some speakers choose to use the terms such as “pro-choice,” “pro-life,” “right to life,” and other terms the *Associated Press* would consider loaded. In the July 1 article “Legislature returns to take on bill,” speakers from the group Texas Right to Life refer to the legislation as “pro-life legislation,” and the supporters of the bill as “pro-lifers.” Political scientist Cal Jillson of Southern Methodist University was quoted in the June 30 article Davis’ abortion stand energizes Democrats. Jillson said: “The right-to-life people are always more motivated than the choice people. Last week that gap seemed to close.” It is notable that Jillson does not refer to the groups by their position on abortion, but by the frames they use to discuss their positions in public.

A unique article was published in the *Statesman* on June 30, documenting how different people reported the story using Twitter. The article, “How the filibuster played out on Twitter,” begins with an archive of tweets from *Statesman* reporter Mike Ward. Ward, on his personal

Twitter account, uses terminology that differs from what the *Statesman* typically publishes. Ward calls the opponents of bill “pro-choice protestors.” In his posts, he is more critical of the Republican Senate members than most *Statesman* articles are. In a post mentioning Davis put on a back brace during the filibuster, he asks: “Another one coming from the GOP?” His next post mentions members of the GOP “pouring” over their rule books, “looking for a way to stop the filibuster, no doubt.”

This leads to questions about the neutrality of journalists on Twitter, which goes beyond the scope of this study. However, Ward’s Twitter posts also demonstrate the neutrality of the reporting in the *Statesman* itself. Mike Ward has the byline on four of the stories in the research sample. Several of these stories are mentioned above and refer to groups as “anti-abortion activists” and “abortion rights activists.” Ward, in his stories, often uses neutral terms such “supporter” and “opponent.”

### Conclusions

The *Austin American-Statesman* was not biased in its coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster. The newspaper follows the guidelines of the AP stylebook, but its use of the terms “anti-abortion” and “abortion rights” do not demonstrate bias. The paper does not frame the debate from the viewpoint of either side.

Also, the *Austin American-Statesman* shows further proof of its impartiality by not assigning a label to each side of the debate when possible. When it labels each side, it rarely labels them from an ideological standpoint, but from a descriptive one. The reporters talked about the colors of shirts and the actions of the crowd. They used neutral phrases such as “bill supporters” and “bill opponents” whenever possible, in place of phrases like “anti-abortion activist” and “abortion rights activist.”

As a paper located close to the heart of the debate, the *Statesman* has a greater need to be unbiased, so as to appeal to all the members in the surrounding community. A national media outlet may be able to garner a greater audience by appealing to a subgroup of people, but a local paper needs to appear fair in order to maintain respect in the community.

## The New York Times

### Introduction

*The New York Times* is a daily newspaper printed in New York City, New York, but distributed widely across the United States (“The New York Times”). Currently, 28 million visitors go to its website, NYTimes.com each month (“The New York Times Media Kit”). The Times was founded as a penny paper in 1851. The publishers wanted the paper to report the news in a fair way that was not sensationalized, differing from other papers available at the time (“The New York Times”).

As a well-known media outlet in the United States, *The New York Times* has been used in many academic studies. A 2005 study found *The New York Times* to lean liberal in terms of its coverage (Groseclose and Milyo 1212). *The New York Times* is highly respected and one of the longest standing newspapers in the United States (“The New York Times), yet accusations of bias surround it. Internet chatrooms and questionnaires such as *Yahoo Answers* entertain questions such as “Liberal bias in The New York Times?” (“Liberal Bias in the New York Times?”). Conservative “news watcher” blogs also accuse the newspaper of liberal bias (Cartaginense, Sheppard).

For the terms and date range, Lexis Nexis pulled 59 articles. Of those 59 articles, the researcher deemed 21 relevant to the study. The other articles were editorials, opinions, letters to the editor, and news stories unrelated to the Wendy Davis filibuster. *The New York Times* includes coverage from *The Texas Tribune*, a Texas media organization that is member-supported and covers politics from a digital platform (“About us,” Texas Tribune). The researcher did not include articles from *The Texas Tribune* unless a *Times* reporter shared the byline.



Here is a breakdown of the terms found in the 59 articles pulled:

Anti-abortion: 27  
     Non-specific uses: 22  
     Anti-abortion groups: 3  
     Anti-abortion supporters: 0  
     Anti-abortion activists: 2  
 Abortion opponents: 7  
 Pro-life: 10  
 Pro-lifers: 0  
 Right to life: 11  
 Right-to-life: 2  
  
 Pro-abortion: 0  
 Pro-choice: 19  
 Pro-choicers: 0  
 Abortion rights: 34  
     Non-specific uses: 30  
     Abortion rights advocates: 3  
     Abortion rights supporters: 1  
     Abortion rights groups: 0  
     Abortion rights activists: 0  
 Women's rights: 8  
     Non-specific uses: 5  
     Women's rights advocates: 3

In its coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster, *The New York Times* uses similar terms as the *Austin American-Statesman*. The term “anti-abortion” is used 27 times, and “abortion rights” is used 30 times. “Abortion opponents” is used seven times, another variation on “anti-abortion.” Even though the stylebooks of AP and The New York Times discourage it, the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice” are used 10 and 19 times, respectively. The context for the uses of those terms will be discussed in the following analysis.

The phrase “women's rights advocates” appears three times, always referring to the people opposed to the bill. Much of the reporting is framed from a women's rights standpoint, as will be discussed further in depth in the analysis section.

The researcher realizes that *The New York Times* uses terms regarding abortion, such as “anti-abortion” and “abortion rights,” that some may consider biased. However, the coverage is not biased on account of these terms. Instead, the framing of the coverage from a “women’s rights” perspective shows favor for the people and ideas in opposition to the bill. Therefore, the researcher concludes that *The New York Times* coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster is slightly biased in favor of the opposition to the bill.

### Analysis

In covering the Wendy Davis filibuster, the *Austin American-Statesman* coverage focused much on the positions the bill and people took on abortion itself. Therefore, the use of the terms “anti-abortion” and “abortion rights” was relevant, because the terms related directly to the discussion at hand. While *The New York Times* does include the abortion controversy, *The New York Times* seems to take a step back and reports the episode through the lenses of women’s rights. By labeling the issue as a women’s rights issue, *The New York Times* is forced to take a side, favoring the parties opposed to the bill. While those in favor of the bill do try to position themselves as protectors of women, “women’s rights” is a frame used commonly by abortion rights activists (Henderson 148).

This framing begins early in *The New York Times*’ coverage. In the first news article written on the event, the June 26 article “Filibuster in Texas tries to halt abortion bill,” the reporter pits the claims of the bill supporters against those of “women’s rights advocates.” The third paragraph is of note:

Supporters of the bill, including the governor and other top Republicans, said the measures would protect women's health and hold clinics to safety standards, but women's rights advocates said the legislation amounted to an unconstitutional, politically

motivated attempt to shut legal abortion clinics. The bill's opponents said it would most likely cause all but 5 of the 42 abortion clinics in the state to close, because the renovations and equipment upgrades necessary to meet surgical-center standards would be too costly.

The reporter believes this phrase demonstrates bias, no matter how covert that bias may be. The supporters of the bill, who believe the bill protects women's health, are contrasted with what the reporter calls "women's rights advocates," who are opposed to the bill. It seems the reporter is choosing which side actually supports women, and he chooses the side that is opposed to the bill. Aggravating this concern is the fact the reporter quotes no "women's rights advocates," nor does give a name or organization to back the term "women's rights advocates."

This juxtaposition happens in the lead of a later article. The July 19 article "Abortion restrictions become law in Texas, but opponents will fight," covers the passing of the bill. The reporter, Manny Fernandez—the same reporter who wrote "Filibuster in Texas tries to halt abortion bill," constructs a similar "Republicans..., but women's rights advocates" sentence in the beginning of the article. This is what he writes:

Six months after declaring his goal to make abortion at any stage "a thing of the past," Gov. Rick Perry signed a bill into law Thursday giving Texas some of the toughest restrictions on abortion in the country, even as women's rights advocates vowed to challenge the law's legality in court.

The comparison of Rick Perry to women's rights advocates is again a hint of the favor toward the side opposing the bill. Women's rights are a sensitive issue in the United States, so highlighting one side as being in favor of women's rights shows inherent bias.

Another article groups women's rights activists and bill opponents together. A June 26 New York Times blog "Video of Texas State Senator's Efforts to Block Abortion Bill" says the Senate gallery was "packed with supporters of women's rights and abortion rights." Many could argue that the term "abortion rights" is biased in favor of abortion. However, the addition of the term "women's rights" seems to group abortion rights and women's rights as synonymous issues, and introduces a clearer element of bias.

Other articles suggest that the debate is over what a woman can or cannot do. In the June 26 article "In Battle over Texas Abortion Bill, Senator's Stand Catches the Limelight," The New York Times casts Davis in a sympathetic light. The article says that Davis "has known long odds, and, for Democrats was the perfect symbol in a fight over what a woman can do." This quote shows the bias in the coverage of the filibuster. First, The *Times* makes statements that pass as fact, but actually walk dangerously close to an opinion. The *Times* states that Davis "has known long odds." This makes The *Times* appear sympathetic to Davis, because the reporter is not quoting anyone here. A conscientious reader should ask here, "What does it mean that she has faced long odds, and who says she has faced long odds?" It seems like an unsupported opinion masquerading as fact.

Second, The *Times* makes another opinion-like statement saying for Democrats, Davis is a "perfect symbol." In neutral writing, adjectives such as "perfect" are avoided. Journalism students are instructed not to say something is perfect, but show it in the details. Perhaps The *Times* does show it in the details throughout this story, but this use of the word "perfect" frames the story around a glowing image of Davis, and that is certainly a bias, whether intentional or not.

The most problematic part of this sentence for an unbiased news outlet is the last part, where the reporter claims the whole issue is “a fight over what a woman can do.” Again, this is a framing of the issue around women’s rights. As discussed in the literature review, groups opposing abortions often do not view women’s rights as the central issue in the abortion debate. Those who oppose abortion frame the issue as one of fetus personhood--fetuses are human beings and are therefore worth protecting (Halva-Neubauer and Zeigler 110). By saying the debate was over what a woman can or cannot do, *The New York Times* is either grossly underestimating the issue or allowing opinion to slip into reporting. In this case, the anti-abortion activists do also say they are concerned with women’s rights, but to leave out the element of fetus personhood does not tell the whole story.

The women’s rights theme continues in this article—again, claiming that the side favoring abortion and opposing the bill is the side favoring women’s rights. After leaving the chamber, Davis was “congratulated by lawmakers and women’s rights advocates,” according to *The New York Times*. Women’s right advocates are again portrayed on the side of Davis, as if those opposed to Davis are also opposed to women’s rights. The article continues with a celebratory attitude about Davis’ success, saying she showed “charisma and guts.”

Another article continues to label “women’s rights advocates” as opponents of the bill. In the July 19 article “Abortion restrictions become law in Texas, but opponents will fight,” the reporter states that “women’s rights advocates” will fight the newly passed law. This again pits one side as in favor of women’s rights. Since *The New York Times* has already framed the coverage as a “women’s rights issue,” claiming one side of the debate as in favor of “women’s rights” shows bias.

## Conclusion

The specific terms used by *The New York Times* follow the AP stylebook and are similar to the terms used by the *Austin American-Statesman*. However, the results of the study differ greatly between *The New York Times* and the *Austin American-Statesman*. Through textual analysis, the researcher concludes *The New York Times* is biased, because it frames the issues raised in the Wendy Davis filibuster as an issue of women's rights.

As discussed in the analysis, the issue of abortion is multifaceted, and not all people believe that it is solely a women's rights issue. In order to refrain from bias, *The New York Times* should not have framed the issue from that standpoint, which clearly favors the views of those supporting Wendy Davis.

As a national newspaper, *The New York Times* covers issues of national concern. Because of this, it is more tempting for *The New York Times* to frame stories around a larger issue. While this technique often leads to meaningful stories, it is important for a newspaper to guard against framing bias. In this case, *The New York Times* chose to report the story using a frame that was clearly favored a side used in the story. Because of this frame, the researcher concludes that *The New York Times* is biased in its coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster; however, the terms it selects to report the event do not denote bias.

## The Washington Times

### Introduction

*The Washington Times* is a newspaper in Washington, D.C. It is printed five days a week, Monday through Friday, and has a distribution of 59,185 in the Washington, D.C., Virginia and Maryland areas. *The Washington Times* website, [washingtontimes.com](http://washingtontimes.com) is viewed on a national level, with 34,966,146 page views per month (“Demographics”). [Washingtontimes.com](http://washingtontimes.com) claims to be “America’s leading destination for hard-hitting news and conservative commentary from the nation’s capital” (“About”).

*The Washington Times* coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster is limited in comparison to that of the *Austin American-Statesman* and *The New York Times*. The researcher pulled six articles from a Google search, because *The Washington Times* is not available on Lexis-Nexis.

*The Washington Times* also uses terms regarding abortion that differ from the AP Stylebook suggestions, as well as those used in *The New York Times* and the *Austin American-Statesman*. *The Washington Times* refers to the different sides of the debate by the names the people refer to themselves as: “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” However, it is interesting to note that the following terms are also used, to a lesser extent: “anti-abortion,” “abortion opponents,” “abortion rights,” “abortion rights supporters,” and “women’s rights groups.”

Here is a breakdown of the terms used in *The Washington Times* coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster, by the numbers:

Anti-abortion: 2

Non-specific uses: 2

Anti-abortion groups: 0

Anti-abortion supporters: 0

Anti-abortion activists: 0

Abortion opponents: 1

Pro-life: 6

Pro-lifers: 0

Right to life: 0  
 Right-to-life: 0

Pro-abortion: 0  
 Pro-choice: 5  
 Abortion rights: 2  
     Abortion rights supporters: 2  
 Women's rights: 1  
     Women's rights groups: 1

*The Washington Times* terms allow the reporters to characterize groups by whatever terms the groups would like to be characterized by. This puts the *Times* in a unique situation, where it appears has the ability to appear the least biased. However, the *Times* statement that the outlet provides “conservative commentary” seems unclear, and appears to leak into news coverage. The researcher will discuss places when commentary seems to overshadow the news coverage, as well as interesting terms below. The researcher concludes *The Washington Times* is mildly biased in its coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster.

#### Analysis

*The Washington Times* admission of valuing “conservative commentary” certainly confuses the reader who consumes the news produced by the outlet. Some of the coverage seems surprisingly neutral. The June 28 article “Texas Sen. Wendy Davis dons urinary catheter for 11-hour filibuster,” sheds Davis in an unexpected but positive light. The outlet calls the filibuster “successful” and said Davis showed an “above and beyond dedication.” Yet, the article also focuses on the catheter she wore—a rather grotesque but minor portion of the filibuster. The attention to this detail gives the appearance that *The Post* is trying to make fun of Davis.

This sense of mockery continues in the July 2 article “Wendy Davis, Texas Democrat who filibustered on abortion, mulls run against Rick Perry.” The article says the Davis “could be considered a hypocrite” if she runs for governor. While the article does give its reasons for



saying this—Davis has criticized Republicans for making a political name for themselves based on abortion stances—the inclusion of this comment shows editorial dissatisfaction with Davis. The reporter could have demonstrated contradictory actions from Davis without outright calling her a “hypocrite.”

*The Washington Times* selection of terms shows in the next three articles. The *Times* use of “pro-life” and “pro-choice” does not make the text surrounding the terms biased in any way. It is interesting to note a couple of other words chosen throughout. Like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Times* groups Democrats and “women’s rights advocates” together in the July 13 article “Texas Legislature passes restrictive abortion law; courts next stop.” A reason for this framing may be because *The Washington Times* does not frame the issue through the lens of women’s rights. The July 8 article “Abortion clinics becoming an endangered species: new state rules make business tough,” focuses on the horrors of abortion. The article references Kermit Gosnell, a doctor at an abortion clinic who was charged with murder for his unethical practices. The article references Gosnell’s clinic as a “house of horrors.”

*The Washington Times* uses the term “abortionists” to refer to people who perform abortions. The researcher recognizes this term can be considered loaded, but found no references of the term that appeared to denote bias. For example, the article includes this line: “In addition, all Texas abortionists would have to have admitting privileges at hospitals within 30 miles, to ensure a patient’s swift emergency care if needed.” This sentence does not appear to cast judgment on a person who performs abortions; instead, it appears to give a concise explanation for where the person stands in the context of the debate over the bill.

Many of *The Times*’ headlines are neutral, but a few appear to contain commentary in an editorial fashion. “Abortion clinics becoming an endangered species: new state rules make

business tough,” seems to hint at some opinion. Calling abortion clinics an “endangered species” seems premature in the context of the article. In the article, state legislators were still working to pass the bill. Saying the bill will make abortion clinics an “endangered species” is not backed by facts, and almost makes *The Washington Times* appear to be using wishful thinking. The headline “Texas Legislature passes restrictive abortion law; courts next stop” also contains opinion. The “courts next stop” is not based on fact, but rather the comments of a Democrat quoted in the article. Therefore, the headline appears to be a prediction more than a truthful report.

The sixth article pulled is worth noting. “King followers now back a multitude of rights from gays to women and animals” comes from a surprisingly liberal mindset. The article briefly mentions the Davis filibuster, but throughout the article, people with progressive views are quoted. There is no voice from anyone who would consider themselves to have a conservative ideology.

### Conclusions

The researcher concludes that *The Washington Times*’ coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster is biased. *The Washington Times* uses terms such as “pro-life,” “pro-choice,” and “abortionist.” While these terms differ from the usual terms used at media outlets, their use does not.

The *Times* frames Wendy Davis, as a person, in a satirical light. The outlet also emphasizes the horrors of abortion to frame the issue, although it does acknowledge the women’s rights side of the debate.

The editorial staff of *The Washington Times* knows they are catering to a market of conservative viewers. Their website claims to provide “conservative commentary” to events

happening in the Washington, D.C. As mentioned above, the paper does not clearly specify whether this commentary includes only editorial and opinion pieces or extends to the news coverage. In some places, the commentary seems to appear in news stories and headlines. The satirical coverage of Wendy Davis and the headlines embedded with predictions seem to suggest that commentary extends to the news coverage.

## Comparison

The *Austin American-Statesman* and *The New York Times* follow the terms suggested by the AP Stylebook most closely. It is surprising, then, that the coverage from the two outlets differs greatly. The *Statesman* tended to avoid characterizing people with the terms suggested by the AP stylebook whenever possible. The outlet instead described the scene—detailing the clothing and circumstances of the protestors—as well as stating positions on the bill rather than positions on abortion. The *Austin American-Statesman* coverage was an attempt to be comprehensive. The outlet covered as many sides and parts of the Wendy Davis filibuster as possible.

In contrast, *The New York Times* focused primarily on one aspect of the debate: women's rights issues. In addition to the terms suggested by the AP stylebook, the *Times* also likened the abortion rights side of the debate to a fight for women's rights. Unlike the *Statesman*, this comparison is not a comprehensive look at all sides. It leaves out the argument of fetus personhood, and additionally makes the judgment that those of the anti-abortion side do not value women's rights.

The *Statesman* and *The Times* are also in different situations. The *Statesman* is a newspaper catering to the local area of Austin, Texas. *The Times* is a national newspaper with a much broader reach. In order to appeal to its smaller audience, the *Statesman* may have a greater interest in being fair to all sides and parties. *The New York Times*, as a national newspaper, considers the question: "Why is this story important?" This consideration may influence the angle of the coverage. *The New York Times* also serves New York, New York, a more progressive city.

The third newspaper, *The Washington Times*, openly caters to conservative viewers. It is logical that the paper would choose to use terms such as “pro-life” and “pro-choice,” because these terms create less offense for those who feel “anti-abortion” unfairly casts a negative light on their views. Therefore, the terms used by *The Washington Times* differ greatly from those used by the *Austin American-Statesman* and *The New York Times*.

However, the approach *The Washington Times* is similar to *The New York Times*. *The Washington Times* focuses on specific parts of the filibuster: particularly, the character of Wendy Davis. The outlet sketches Davis in a near-satirical light, something that may appeal to the readers of the *Times*.

Here are the most important terms compared from each outlet:

Terms	Statesman	NYT	Washington
Anti-abortion	15	27	2
Abortion opponents	16	7	1
Pro-life	8	10	6
Pro-lifers	3	0	0
Right to life	17	11	0
Pro-abortion	1	0	0
Pro-choice	6	19	5
Pro-choicers	1	0	0
Abortion rights	37	34	2
Women's rights	8	8	1

### Conclusions

The researcher concludes that the media are not biased in the usage of terms regarding abortion. However, because of national media outlets tendency to report stories by framing them around a larger issue, the media are, in some instances, biased in the coverage of the Wendy Davis filibuster.

*The New York Times* and the *Austin American-Statesman* used similar terms to describe stances on abortion. These terms are controversial, yet recommended by the AP stylebook. However, the researcher concluded different results from each of these outlets. The *Austin American-Statesman*, a local state newspaper, was not biased, while *The New York Times*, a national media outlet, was.

Though the two outlets used the same terms, the *Austin American-Statesman* did not frame the coverage of the events around a larger issue. Instead, the *Austin American-Statesman* reported the events as they happened, and even tried to avoid using the controversial terms when possible. For example, in several places, The *Statesman* used terms such as “bill supporters” instead of “anti-abortion activists.” This did not label people because of their position on abortion, but stated what was happening in the situation—the people supported a bill that would restrict abortions after 20 weeks.

*The New York Times* used similar terms but framed this issue as a “women’s rights” issue. While many people involved in the story viewed the situation as an issue of women’s rights, not all parties involved saw it that way. Issues such as fetus personhood were left unaddressed (Halva-Neubauer and Zeigler 110). By framing it as a “women’s rights issue,” *The New York Times* could be accused of adding their own opinion to the story and skewing fair coverage of the events surrounding the Wendy Davis filibuster.

*The Washington Times* used different words than *The New York Times* and the *Austin American-Statesman* to describe opinions regarding abortion and Senate Bill 5. However, these words also did not demonstrate bias. Instead, framing around issues and ideas about Wendy Davis a person led to bias. *The Washington Times* portrayed Wendy Davis in a seemingly satirical light, nearly calling her a “hypocrite.”

The researcher concludes that different terms regarding abortion do not denote bias in themselves. There are certainly exceptions to this statement, but because of the controversial nature of the subject of abortion, picking one word over another does not make a media outlet more or less biased in its coverage of abortion-related issues.

A media outlet becomes biased when it frames issues from a certain perspective. This bias does not come from terms regarding abortion itself—such as the terms “anti-abortion” and “pro-life”—but when media outlets assign terms such as “women’s rights groups.” While the term “women’s rights groups” does not automatically denote bias, using this term often requires a judgment call on who supports women’s rights and who does not. Additionally, *The New York Times* frames the Senate Bill 5 as an issue over what a woman can do, it demonstrates support for the groups it labels as “women’s rights groups” over the ones it does not.

From this study, the researcher hypothesizes that national media outlets are more likely to be biased, because they frame stories around important issues, rather than reporting on an event in their community.

The researcher also hypothesizes that local outlets are more likely to be neutral, because local outlets gain more from being neutral. To appeal to all members of its community, a local outlet should be fair and show impartiality to all sides of the community. A national news outlet does not have as great of a need to be impartial. The outlet may draw more viewers to itself because it takes a side. This was evident in cable news channel MSNBC’s growth in prime-time viewership. MSNBC positioned its content as liberal, to compete with the conservative commentary from FOX News. For this reason, MSNBC surpassed CNN in prime-time viewership and continues to grow in popularity. Before this, MSNBC took a neutral stance on issues (Holcomb and Mitchell).

For these reasons, the researcher hypothesizes that national outlets can tend to more biased than local outlets. Further research should test these hypotheses. Additionally, this study should be performed with terms on other issues.

### Discussion

It would be easy to generalize these findings, but it is important to refrain from doing so. This study is not conclusive enough to support the claim that the *Austin American-Statesman* is always neutral, *The New York Times* always leans liberal, and *The Washington Times* always leans conservative. These conclusions should not even be applied to all coverage on abortion-related issues. Additionally, the conclusion that national newspapers are always biased should not be made.

These observations are certainly topics that should merit further study, but should not be taken to apply to all news outlets at all times. The researcher guards against making claims of bias toward an entire news outlet, particularly because of the variety of conclusions made by prior studies.



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