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### Authors

Herold, Stephanie  
Sisson, Gretchen

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# “You can’t tell this story without abortion”: television creators on narrative intention and development of abortion stories on their shows

Stephanie Herold <sup>1,\*</sup>, Gretchen Sisson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Reproductive Sciences, Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH), University of California, San Francisco, CA, USA

\*Corresponding author: Stephanie Herold. Email: stephanie.herold@ucsf.edu

## Abstract

Scholars and advocates often cite media as a mechanism to change culture, especially related to contested issues in American politics such as abortion. While there is mixed evidence in support of this claim, it is not clear how media content creators conceptualize their abortion plotlines. We identified television shows available to U.S. audiences that included abortion plotlines and purposively recruited the creators who worked on them. Forty-six American creators completed in-depth interviews. Respondents’ primary reasons for including abortion plotlines were: (1) to normalize abortion; (2) to deploy abortion as source of character development; and (3) to respond to politics. Some respondents reported barriers to getting abortion content from page to screen, including stigmatizing attitudes towards abortion from colleagues and network executives. Respondents did not necessarily aspire to reflect the reality of abortion access in the US, instead seeking to destigmatize abortion by portraying televisual representations of compassionate, shame-free abortions.

**Keywords:** abortion, television, abortion stigma, production studies, television studies

Following the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Association* United States Supreme Court decision in June 2022, which re-voiced the constitutional right to abortion, *The Hollywood Reporter* published interviews with 13 prominent Hollywood storytellers, all of whom had written or produced abortion plotlines (Galuppo, 2022). These American showrunners and filmmakers described their vision of the role and responsibility of the entertainment industry to respond to this abortion access crisis. Some, like *Plan B* director Natalie Morales, encouraged Hollywood to create content specifically aimed at educating anti-abortion viewers: “If people aren’t getting this [abortion information] in schools and they aren’t getting this in their homes, maybe they can get it on their TV.” Others, like Alexandra Rushfield, co-creator of the television show *Shrill*, reflected on how she would change the show’s abortion plotline: “If I were doing it now, I’d also try to show the more recent reality, which is someone having to go to a different state.” Jennie Snyder Urman, creator of the show *Jane the Virgin*, commented on how the *Dobbs* decision impacted her storytelling priorities: “The more that we de-sensationalize abortion and contextualize it in terms of a woman’s choice and health, that’s the powerful thing we can do on TV to counteract all of this.” Though they differ across genres, platforms, and production role, these content creators each articulate a firm belief in media as a source of both political and cultural shift.

Entertainment television is an influential source of information about sexual and reproductive health for a variety of audiences, and exposure to this type of content, often referred to as Entertainment Education (EE), has indeed contributed to positive health outcomes, such as increased audience knowledge about contraceptive efficacy (Wang & Singhal, 2016) and

increased knowledge about medication abortion (Sisson et al., 2021). Though there is rich academic literature on the possibilities and limitations of “edu-tainment” as a tool for health education, the literature largely focuses on content analysis and impact evaluation (Hoffman et al., 2017). This limits our ability to understand and evaluate the essential behind-the-scenes processes that lead to these plotlines, including questions about how content creators make decisions, their motivations, what barriers they face, and what they perceive to be the effect of these plotlines. As the content creators hint at in their *Hollywood Reporter* interviews, these questions are particularly important for entertainment media depictions of stigmatized and politicized health issues such as abortion.

General knowledge about abortion has always been low among the American public, (Swartz et al., 2020), and recent changes in the legal status of abortion are likely to create more confusion, not just about legality but also safety and access. In this renewed climate of increased restrictions on abortion in some U.S. states and increased protections of abortion in others, misinformation and social myths are likely to flourish, with potential consequences for people’s medical and legal safety. Americans continue to cite entertainment television as a significant sources of health information (Greenberg, 2022); as such, it is crucial to understand what messages television communicates about abortion and how those messages are crafted.

American television has a long history of depicting abortion, reflecting and refracting contemporary myths. Communication scholar Celeste Condit categorizes three broad themes in post-*Roe* televisual abortion representations: “regulatory” programs in which protagonists have mixed or

negative feelings about abortion yet support a secondary character seeking an abortion; “false pregnancy” plotlines in which a character decides to have an abortion yet ultimately does not have one, and “emotionally anguished” abortion plotlines, in which a character does have an abortion, but suffers dramatic emotional turmoil as a result (Condit, 1990). Contemporary American depictions of abortion build on and are distinct from these tropes, cultivating new patterns of representations, such as the mother/daughter abortion conversation, in which a daughter confesses a past abortion to her mother and the mother reciprocates, sharing her own past abortion for the first time, and the “abortion road trip” in which teenagers travel together to seek abortion care (Herold & Sisson, 2023). Why content creators shifted away from the abortion storytelling tropes of previous decades and what they hoped to achieve with these narratives is unclear.

This shift in how American television plotlines portray abortion does not mean that contemporary abortion storytelling lacks stigmatizing representations or is more medically accurate in comparison to historical depictions. Today’s television plotlines often exaggerate abortion’s medical risk (Sisson & Rowland, 2017), overrepresent young, White, wealthy women as abortion seekers (Herold & Sisson, 2020), depict unrealistically few financial, legal, or logistical barriers to abortion access (Herold & Sisson, 2020), and misrepresent the procedure itself as an invasive operation (Herold & Sisson, 2019). Given these discrepancies and changing patterns of representations, it is important to understand how content creators shape these narratives and what they hope the impact of these depictions on viewers might be.

Interviews with American television creators suggest both thoughtful deliberation and apprehension in portraying controversial issues (Klein, 2011). Mainstream press interviews with content creators discuss the challenges of producing stories about abortion, including pressure from networks to rewrite or eliminate abortion content. Prolific showrunner Shonda Rhimes, for example, has spoken about network pushback on Olivia Pope’s abortion on a 2016 episode of *Scandal* (Fang, 2022). On a conference panel of television showrunners, nearly all had a story about networks asking them to rewrite abortion plotlines to appease perceived audience disgust with abortion (Tierce, 2021). These institutional barriers to abortion depictions are not new; creator Norman Lear shared that he faced significant pushback from CBS related to his 1972 *Maude* abortion plotline and was forced to make substantial changes for them to agree to broadcast it, including creating a character to articulate an anti-abortion point of view (Dibdin, 2017). Likewise, screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein, writer of the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*, has also spoken publicly regarding pressure from both the film studio and advertisers to remove the abortion storyline from her film, which she refused to do (Vagianos, 2017). These recollections of contemporary and historical U.S. network reluctance to support abortion plotlines often focus on one specific television show or showrunner instead of tracking institutional practices over time. This limits our ability to understand and evaluate patterns in behind-the-scenes processes that lead to these plotlines, including the intended purpose of abortion plotlines and what barriers creators face in incorporating them into their shows. This research aims to fill that gap and understand the context of abortion plotline creation at this pivotal moment for abortion rights in the US. Our interviews illustrate that content creators endeavor to create

new representations in service of destigmatizing abortion. Unlike the public narrative about networks being the biggest barrier to abortion plotlines, we found that writers encounter stigmatizing attitudes about abortion from their peers and supervisors, often before the plotlines make it to the networks for commentary. This has important implications for understandings of abortion stigma and media advocacy.

## Methodology

The study team conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with U.S.-based entertainment content creators, including showrunners, directors, producers, and writers between September and December 2021. This study received approval from the Western Institution Review Board-Copernicus Group (WCG IRB) before recruitment began.

## Recruitment

We recruited participants both purposively and via snowball sampling. Using a database of scripted abortion plotlines on American television (abortiononscreen.org), we identified episodes that included an abortion plotline and aired for U.S. audiences between January 2011 and December 2021. We defined “an abortion plotline” as one or more episodes in which a character obtained or disclosed an abortion. Using the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), we identified showrunners, directors, producers, and writers that had worked on these plotlines. We used publicly available contact information to recruit those identified on our list and completed interviews with those who expressed interest.

At the end of each interview, we asked participants to suggest other content creators who might be interested in participating. The first author cold-contacted a total of 104 individuals, including referrals from participants, and completed 46 interviews. We attempted to contact each participant three times before classifying them as unavailable.

## Procedures

We completed interviews via phone or Zoom audio between September and December 2021. The interviews lasted between 23 min and 73 minutes with an average of 45 minutes. Both authors developed the interview guide jointly, in collaboration with a consulting screenwriter, who provided crucial feedback on specific questions related to job titles, salary bands, industry experience, and confidentiality.

We asked participants about their demographic background (i.e., age, race, gender identity, educational attainment, household income), industry experience (i.e., occupation, length of time working in entertainment, professional roles, past and current projects), abortion plotline history (i.e., their motivations for including abortion, how the idea of an abortion plotline emerged in the writers room, how they hoped the audience might react to the plotline, and what barriers, if any, they encountered in getting the abortion from page to screen). We also asked participants to reflect on any general trends they observed in Hollywood regarding abortion depictions.

Because of the high socioeconomic status of this sample population, we did not offer an incentive for study participation. We took written notes during each interview related to themes and typed up those notes as research memos. We audio-recorded and transcribed each interview.

## Analysis

The first author completed analysis using *Atlas.ti Web* (Version 4.0.2-2022-07-29), a software used for qualitative data coding. The first author reviewed the research memos to create a list of broad themes across interviews, such as “barriers,” “challenges,” “support,” and “landscape commentary.” After reviewing five interviews with these categories in mind, the first author created subcategories within each of these codes. For example, “barriers” included “barriers—network,” “barriers—other content creators,” and “barriers—anti-abortion individuals.” During this initial coding, we added in-vivo codes (Charmaz, 2006) drawn from interviews directly, such as “motivation—tell a new/different story about abortion” or “experience—wishing something was different about my plotline.” The second author independently coded five interviews (10% of the sample) and achieved 95% reliability.

## Results

### Participant background

Forty-six American entertainment content creators participated in interviews about their experience writing, editing, producing, and/or directing episodes of television that included abortion plotlines (see Table 1). Most participants identified as female (87%) and White (70%). Many interviewees reported working in television (77%), with the most common role of writer (40%), producer (21%), and showrunner (18%), though many discussed inhabiting multiple roles over the course of their careers. Most participants had lengthy careers in the entertainment industry: about one-third (31%) reported between six and 10 years of experience, slightly more than a quarter (26%) reported between 16 and 20 years of experience, and about one fifth (21%) reported more than 21 years in the entertainment industry.

Demographic trends among television showrunners and content creators are often broken down by how the content is distributed (via broadcast scripted shows, cable scripted shows, or digital scripted shows). Because many of our respondents worked across these various media during their careers, we cannot make direct comparisons between the demographics of our sample and the demographics of Hollywood creators in general. However, when compared to a larger study documenting diversity among content creators across race and gender from the University of California, Los Angeles’ publication “Hollywood Diversity Report 2021,” our sample was less White-identifying (79.2% compared to our 70%) and meaningfully more female-identifying (35% compared to our 87%) (Hunt & Ramón, 2021). The breadth and depth of experience by role and experience uniquely qualifies our sample to remark on trends related to abortion depictions on television.

### “Let’s show a different kind of abortion”: motivations for writing abortion plotlines

Thirty-four content creators (74%) discussed being motivated to include abortion in their work to counter stigmatizing cultural narratives about abortion. They articulated a desire to craft new stories about abortion, stories that showcase characters they had not seen obtain abortions onscreen before. Participants drew stark contrasts between tropes and their

**Table 1.** Participant demographics

	N	%
<b>Sex</b>		
Cisgender man	6	13%
Cisgender woman	40	87%
<b>Race</b>		
White	31	70%
Black	7	16%
Latina	3	7%
Asian	1	2%
Biracial	2	5%
<b>Age</b>		
26 to 30	1	2%
31 to 40	15	33%
41 to 50	21	47%
51 to 60	7	16%
Refused	1	2%
<b>Education</b>		
Some college	1	2%
College	33	72%
Graduate	10	22%
Medical	1	2%
Doctorate	1	2%
<b>Employment</b>		
Fully employed	36	80%
Freelance	7	16%
Other	2	4%
<b>Income</b>		
\$100 k & below	1	2%
\$101 k to \$200 k	1	2%
\$201 k to \$300 k	5	11%
\$301 k to \$400 k	11	24%
\$401 k to \$500 k	2	4%
\$501 k and above	12	26%
Refused/Don’t know	14	30%
<b>Type of Media</b>		
TV	34	77%
Film	0	0%
Both	10	23%
<b>Roles in Production</b>		
Writer	31	40%
Producer	16	21%
Executive producer	13	17%
Showrunner	14	18%
Actor	1	1%
Director	2	3%
<b>Length of Time in the Industry</b>		
1 year to 5 years	2	5%
6 years to 10 years	12	31%
11 years to 15 years	7	18%
16 to 20 years	10	26%
21 years or over	8	21%

own writing, making explicit that they intended to convey the normality of abortion:

We weren’t telling the story about this, like, poor teenage girl, who, you know, had to get an abortion because she was involved with an abusive guy or something. You know, we didn’t need to justify this abortion (...) [character] chose to get an abortion, which is a perfectly legitimate choice for any woman to get. (Co-executive producer, comedy series)

Others recalled that depictions of abortion on television often center the episodic conflict around pregnancy decision-making, and they purposefully avoided this by portraying

characters already certain about their decision to have an abortion, seeking conflict in other storytelling elements:

A number of shows had already tackled the decision-making (...) we wanted to tackle the reason people were reticent to talk about [abortion] (...) we didn't want to make it a tortured decision." (Executive producer, drama series)

Some found alternative sources for drama related to the abortion but not about the abortion decision itself, such as characters encountering bullying anti-abortion protestors on their way into an abortion clinic. One participant characterized this normalization effort as "taking the emotion out of this medical procedure" and instead, putting "the emotion [in] getting access to a procedure" (Executive producer, medical drama).

Five content creators discussed the racialized tropes related to television depictions of abortion, articulating their motivations to represent the experiences of characters of color. In describing her vision for one plotline, one writer on a medical drama explained: "it's not a 'White girl in the middle of nowhere trying to get an abortion' story." Similarly, a showrunner of a comedy series shared her reasoning behind telling abortion stories with characters of color: "If you are growing up and you are a person of color, you should also see yourself reflected on television and you should see the complexities that women have to deal with dramatized on television."

Others expressed a desire to portray abortion as a safe, common, and normal part of their characters' lives. Nine shared that they drew from their own abortion experiences as inspiration in their work:

I wanted to just share an abortion experience like mine (...) [character] knew exactly what she wanted to do, didn't have reservations about getting the abortion, and her overwhelming feeling when it was done was relief. And that mirrored mine closely and I haven't seen that as much, where it's not a tough decision. (Director, comedy film)

Ten made broad connections between these normalizing representations and cultural shifts in viewers' abortion attitudes. They envisioned a causal relationship between abortion representations and compassion for people who have abortions:

I think TV characters, especially in recurring shows, can feel like family and you love this character. And then you see them experience something and it's a vicarious experience for you, my hope is that it expands people's minds and/or empowers people or at least allows people to think about abortion in a broader context, as opposed to in a very narrow way. (Executive producer, drama series)

Many writers (n = 22) discussed incorporating abortion-seeking into a plotline to serve narrative functions related to character development and relationships, which in turn advanced longer story arcs. These creators specified that they did not intend to do "an abortion storyline," but grounded their abortion story in a broader context:

The abortion was like just an escalation in the story process. So we kind of didn't – you know, we didn't set out to

say let's do an abortion storyline, you know, and I think that again, that's when the best stories come out, is when you're just really dealing with a character and then stories come out of the character's circumstances. (Executive producer, drama series)

Others echoed this sentiment that for them, an abortion plotline originated in a character's backstory and current situation; introducing abortion into the plot offered an organic opportunity to reveal new character attributes. A pregnancy plotline, not just an abortion plotline, provided an opportunity to explore larger questions about family and identity:

The [characters] were making decisions about their family planning or having a child (...) and having to decide if it was the right thing for them, given circumstances that were perhaps not ideal to have a child (...) We wrote them to be conflicts that the character was having about what the future would look like for them and their family. (Writer, drama series)

Abortion emerged as one of several options available to writers in serialized storytelling to create or augment drama and conflict amongst characters. In these instances, a character deciding to have an abortion was an opportunity to interrogate or change a relationship between characters.

A small but meaningful minority (n = 19) used these plotlines to respond to what they viewed as political attacks on abortion access. Participants spoke broadly about threats to abortion legality, referencing contemporary U.S. Supreme Court cases and restrictive state laws and the responsibility of television writers to use their platform to educate viewers about these issues. They spoke about political moments that motivated them to incorporate abortion into their plotlines:

Right during that period, Brett Kavanaugh got nominated [to the U.S. Supreme Court]. This was before his hearings but just as he was nominated it became clear that abortion was going to be in danger. And so myself and (...) the showrunner, we were going for a walk, trying to figure out what the episode needed (...) I said, 'We need to deal with abortion.' (Executive producer, drama series)

These interviewees described feeling a responsibility to address the legal landscape of abortion access with the hope of increasing audience awareness of threats to abortion legality.

### "I fought for this abortion": challenges to getting the abortion from page to screen

More than half of participants encountered significant interpersonal challenges to creating depictions of abortion onscreen. Even when they were eventually able to include an abortion plotline, these participants discussed difficulties navigating gender dynamics, especially when colleagues wielded institutional power as showrunners. When male colleagues held positional power over writers, participants described instances of showrunners refusing input, even from staff who provided critical feedback about the plotline. Speaking about her experience in a writers' room overseen by male showrunner, one writer on a legal drama shared, "it's like you can hire as many [women] as you want, but if the people in power don't listen to them, then it kind of doesn't matter." Another

writer on a drama echoed this sentiment: “The marginalized people in the room are just there hopefully to get—like [showrunners] just want them to like absolve them of the thing they’re going to do no matter what.”

Five described similar experiences worrying that male colleagues would tamper with their plotlines, such as this writer on a drama series: “I was full of dread that the way that I wanted to tell the story wasn’t going to be accepted by my male boss.” Three recounted that when they argued that certain characters, when faced with unintended pregnancies, would have had abortions, male showrunners overrode them. One writer on a legal drama elaborated on the difference between feedback from writers versus showrunners:

As long as it’s coming from (...) a place of story, I rarely see writers in the community of a show knock down an idea around abortion. And where it usually happens is when the showrunner comes into the room and goes, ‘Well I don’t know. Does it have to go there?’

Five participants recalled that their male colleagues expressing concern about a character’s reason for having an abortion. A writer on a drama/comedy series recalled such a conversation:

The thing came up, like, can it just be that she just wants to have an abortion ‘cause she won’t get to do the things she wants if she has a child. And a couple of the guys were like, ‘Oh, that just sounds like – I think that like sounds kind of selfish’ and that sort of became a thing (...) how do you portray a woman just wanting to do something because it’s what she wants and doesn’t seem callous and how are people going to perceive that character?

Four remembered debates among writers about whether a character needed to disclose her decision to have an abortion to a male partner, and whether a character’s decision to keep her abortion a secret would change how the audience viewed that character. While having animated discussions amongst content creators was not described as unique to abortion plotlines, these discussions seemed to elevate differences in storytelling priorities that respondents described as often falling on gendered lines:

“I don’t think when you are the privileged class you feel a responsibility in your storytelling to have any social impact (...) what I hear from male writers, like, ‘I can tell the best story.’ They just push back against anything even resembling responsibility.” (Executive producer, drama series)

Two content creators compared their experiences working with male showrunners to working with an all-women team, particularly when there was a woman in charge of the entire production and remarked on how that could transform the dynamic from needing to justify an abortion story to allowing for more complex conversations about how to depict the abortion.

Twenty-three participants detailed engaging in philosophical debates about the purpose of television as it related to abortion plotlines, citing comments from colleagues about the importance of drama over social commentary. One writer on a drama series described the dynamic this way: “We [women] are doing the emotional labor of, like, what is the

responsibility of the writer. And the male writer’s like, ‘Oh, let’s just write fun entertainment, who cares?’”

Interviewees discussed arguing with their peers about where to locate conflict in the episode if it did not arise from the abortion:

“The women wanted to show a very non-dramatic experience because we felt like either ourselves or women that we knew have had this experience (...) a lot of the men in our room who were trying to be supportive but were wanting to see the drama, right? Like why are we doing this storyline if there’s no drama? (...) a lot of it was just explaining to them why doing a more low-key abortion was so important if it didn’t service the drama of the plot.” (Writer, drama series)

Nine content creators navigated this tension by attempting to balance what they considered to be best for the characters and what messages they wanted to convey about abortion. One writer on a drama series explained this tension, saying: “The challenge (...) is how do you tell a story that normalizes [abortion] and treats it like no big deal while also telling a compelling dramatic story?” Others pointed out the challenges inherent in navigating these competing priorities, particularly between writers, showrunners, and network executives. In explaining the origin of a conflict over an abortion depiction, one writer on a comedy series described the differing motives of network executives by saying: “you know, they’re not trying to make any social change.” Although many of these abortion depictions did make it to the screen, content creators had to educate both to their peers and superiors about the cultural and political implications of the details of abortion depictions.

Twenty-one participants described encountering a broad discomfort with abortion among colleagues, often when a writer advocated for the character seeking the abortion to be portrayed without any associated shame or ambivalence. Five reported that during discussions of abortion plotlines, some colleagues expressed disapproval of the character’s proposed reason for seeking an abortion:

We had a few writers who identify as more religious, who, though they support abortion access for other people, would not want it for themselves. And so I think that they were initially coming from a position of wanting there to be more, like, angst in the decision or feeling like [character’s] hand should be forced a little bit. And I think it was, for a lot of the women in the room, it was very important that we see a different type of decision-making. (Writer, drama series)

Thirteen participants encountered *anticipated* discomfort—their colleagues feared that others, particularly individuals with more institutional power, would object to abortion content. One writer on a drama series remembered, “I think, like, the higher up writers on the show were like, ‘we don’t know if [the network] will be ok with this [abortion plotline].’” While this plotline did eventually air, the writer explained that they had to alter the plotline as it was originally written to address feedback from network that the reasons for the onscreen abortion needed to be more “sympathetic.” Another writer on a comedy series connected this anticipated discomfort to broader network understandings of abortion as a

controversial political issue with the potential to alienate audiences:

You have bosses telling you, ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa. Like we’re getting political here and, you know, we’re taking it from the personal to the political, and then it seems like we’re taking a stance and we have to be apolitical to appeal to the most number of people possible.’

Some respondents faced obstacles to depicting abortion that they were not able to overcome. Sixteen interviewees described other points in their careers in which their abortion plotlines never made it to the screen. Eight attributed this to the differing priorities of showrunners and executives. After explaining that she advocated to the showrunner for one character to have an abortion, a writer on a drama series stated, “I don’t remember the abortion storyline ever having any traction in that room. But remember, a straight white man was running that room,” later adding, “with [showrunner], it was always what he is interested in saying politically, and [abortion] was not on his agenda.”

Eighteen participants described gatekeeping practices at television networks related to receiving approval for an abortion storyline in which writers were repeatedly questioned about the necessity of the story to the plot and if the abortion plotline might negatively affect the network’s business. In describing these financial concerns, one producer on a drama series explained the relationship between abortion plotlines and business considerations:

All Apple cares about is selling Apple TVs and selling iPhones (...) so they will never – I mean, they’ve said this explicitly, that they just will not do any political content in their original programming because they don’t want, you know, pro-lifers picketing outside of Apple stores. That’s just bad business for them.

Other writers reiterated this perceived fear among U.S. network executives of alienating advertisers or a real or imagined conservative viewership. A writer and producer of a drama series recalled an experience early in her career, saying:

I remember wanting to tackle [abortion] earlier [in the show] but I think that the success of the show (...) was in its nascent stages and there was an insecurity on the leadership front about what America could abide (...) It’s just basically advertising. It’s like you don’t want to turn off the evangelical base or their advertisers and it’s quite dispiriting.

After writing an abortion plotline, this same writer described arguing with producers about the content. When they rejected it entirely, she remembered: “I was so angry and I inquired as to why and I got a really frustrating, vague response, which is just like, ‘There are legal issues. We can’t do it at this time,’ which I thought was bullshit, frankly.” A producer of a legal drama described similarly opaque responses from executives in response to abortion plotline pitches, with a clear sense of what animates these rejections:

Networks are, especially prime time networks (...) they don’t want to tell abortion stories, you know, and it’s really depressing (...) I would say probably the number one

reason is advertisers (...) you know, they don’t want their car being advertised on the commercial break right after someone says, ‘I’m going to get an abortion.’ (...) There will be backlash against abortion storylines and, you know, calls for boycotts and calls for repudiation and networks as a whole would rather not go there.

Whether or not the anticipated reactions of audiences to abortion plotlines are accurate, these fears created a hostile environment for content creators to pitch, write, and produce creative abortion plotlines.

Five content creators described original projects that focused entirely on abortion and the accompanying rejection from mainstream television networks. One writer on a drama series recalled that a network commissioned her to write a series set in an abortion clinic, and after she completed it, the network refused to produce the show, and did not explain why. Another executive producer of various comedy series remembered sharing the pilot episode of an original series, also focusing on characters at an abortion clinic, with various networks: “The response I’ve gotten has been, ‘Wow, we love this so much. We love your writing so much. We love the tone, we love these characters (...) We just can never make a show about abortion.’” In reflecting on these experiences, one writer on a drama series explained her perception that stigma, misinformation, and fear undergird these reactions: “My instinct is that there is so much stigma around abortion and so much discomfort with the topic that most studio executives are like, ‘Oh, my God, abortion? No.’”

Participants contrasted Hollywood’s reputation as a politically progressive environment with their experiences receiving repeated rejections on their abortion-related work, reiterating that the overwhelming negative response from networks is based in the (mis)perception of abortion as alienating to advertisers and audiences alike.

## Discussion

Our sample of U.S. television content creators are motivated to include depictions of abortion in their work to normalize abortion and craft what they perceive as novel, non-stigmatizing, representations of abortion on television. Participants widely agreed that past depictions of abortion may have contributed to cultural myths of abortion as tragic, shameful, and dangerous and some felt an obligation for shifting this perception through their work. Past research has documented the widespread discrepancies between fictional and real-life abortion patients (Herold & Sisson, 2020), and our findings suggest that content creators are not always aiming for accuracy in their depictions, but rather are constructing aspirational abortion depictions. That is, they are not necessarily attempting to mirror the obstacles and hardships that today’s abortion seekers encounter, but instead, craft a reality in which abortion is easy to access and free from interpersonal and institutional stigma and regulation.

Though many interviewees discussed their hope that these depictions increase audience knowledge about and political support for abortion, the causal relationship between television viewership and political change remains tenuous. Indeed, despite a dramatic increase in depictions on television over the last decade, U.S. politicians continue to propose and pass an unprecedented number of restrictions on abortion, culminating in the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2022 decision to withdraw

the constitutional right to abortion. More research is needed to understand what, if any, relationship exists between viewing abortion plotlines and abortion attitudes and knowledge. Research on televisual portrayals of other marginalized groups, such as transgender characters and undocumented immigrants, suggests that continued exposure to these characters is significantly associated with more positive attitudes towards these groups and policies that support marginalized individuals (Gillig et al., 2018; Rosenthal et al., 2020). It is unclear if abortion portrayals function in a similar way—abortion is typically a one-time action that a character takes, while being transgender, for example, is an ongoing, often defining attribute of a character. Regardless, many respondents articulated a clear role that they *perceive* television to have in social, legal, and cultural change, and that “perceived influence” as Himberg (2018) calls it, is a powerful force undergirding their continued efforts to craft abortion content.

Although some participants distanced themselves from overt politicization of abortion content, including abortion as one of many options in serialized storytelling might still be meaningful contribution towards abortion normalization, particularly for content creators working on television shows on U.S. broadcast networks. These portrayals might reach broader and more politically diverse audiences than abortion plotlines on more niche or streaming networks, and perhaps influence viewers who are less inclined to have positive attitudes towards abortion.

Production studies scholars implore us to reconsider understanding the pressures that American writers, showrunners, and producers face as a “tug-of-war between innovative, socially conscious (...) programming on one side and safe, stereotypical (...) programming on the other” (Polletta & Tomlinson, 2014). This simplification obscures the more complex social and political contexts in which abortion plotlines are created, debated, edited, and produced or rejected. Many respondents recounted their efforts to conduct what Himberg calls “under-the-radar activism” to educate colleagues and superiors about the political and cultural ramifications of abortion depictions (2018). These complex negotiations offer relevant insights into how institutional and interpersonal manifestations of abortion stigma shape abortion depictions. Manifestations of institutional stigma, whether financial concerns about advertiser abandonment or apprehension about audience approval of abortion plotlines, meant, for some writers, that their abortion plotlines had to be significantly altered to stay in a script. Experiences of interpersonal stigma, such as peers debating about whether a character’s reasons for seeking an abortion made her callous or questioning how the plot benefits from depicting abortion as simple and safe instead of as dramatic and risky, meant that our respondents had the additional burden of educating their peers about abortion and the damage these negative portrayals may have on audiences, while also crafting compelling, innovative content. Abortion depictions onscreen, then, are not created only in response to the reality of abortion access in the US but are also constructed after what may be prolonged debate and negotiation among writers, showrunners, and executives about their purpose and impact. Understanding the context and content of these interactions provides advocates with new avenues to partner with content creators who have a shared goal of creating abortion content.

## Limitations

Our study has several limitations. We utilized snowball sampling recruitment and may have missed networks of individuals not connected to the respondents we interviewed. Our data do not represent the full entertainment industry, but instead provides insight into the motivations of and obstacles faced by content creators who are most interested in portraying abortion onscreen. Because we conducted these interviews before the U.S. Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, it is possible that the environment in Hollywood related to the willingness to take risks related to abortion plotlines has changed.

## Conclusions

These interviews provide new insight into American content creator motivations for including abortion plotlines in U.S. television and film, and the barriers they face in doing so. Many reported a desire to craft depictions that they hoped would normalize abortion for audiences, and faced challenges from colleagues, superiors, and networks in bringing these depictions to air. Instead of attempting to portray complex, grim realities of abortion access in the US, participants often opted to showcase their hopeful vision for an “ideal” abortion, one without legal or logistical obstacles. Given the hostile political climate related to abortion, these creators may need to provide additional information to their colleagues about the reality of abortion in the US, and assertively advocate to networks on the value of less risk-averse storytelling. Indeed, content creators may find it helpful to share polling that underscores widespread public support for legal abortion in the US (Molla, 2022) and illustrates the stances that other corporations are taking in support of abortion access (Sonnenfeld et al., 2022) as evidence to suggest that American audiences may willing to tune in to more abortion-related content. Perhaps most importantly, advocates working towards nuanced depictions of abortion on television and film might prioritize working in concert with interested media makers to chronicle the interpersonal and institutional obstacles they face in getting abortion from page to screen and design pathways to address those barriers together.

## Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to ethical concerns related to the identities of research participants. De-identified data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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