GENDER BIAS IN NETWORK NEWS REPORTING: INACCURATE RISK INFORMATION
ABOUT MALE AND FEMALE BIRTH CONTROL

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Pharmaceutical companies spend considerable amounts of revenue on advertising; therefore, media networks must portray an agenda which supports those companies. This thesis attempts to discover if and to what extent women are marginalized by the promotion of hormonal birth control. Particular focus is placed on the link between these drugs and breast cancer risk, as well as the existence of gendered messages. Framework for the study is established through Agenda-setting Theory and Marxist and feminist criticism. Media messages about birth control are then interpreted through content analysis. Only 9% of messages about female birth control mention the link with breast cancer, and about 15% of messages which target either gender do not discuss any adverse effects. These results show the prevalence of misleading media messages about these drugs, and confirm earlier theories which criticize the media for containing gender bias. Further research could measure the degree to which media messages about birth control affect the healthcare practices of individuals.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITION OF TERMS USED

Importance of the Study

Although it may now be considered common knowledge that breast cancer is linked to hormone replacement therapy (HRT), the link between the cancer and hormonal oral contraceptives (OC’s) is neither well-known nor mentioned in news reports. Kumle et Al. (2002) reported a 30% greater risk of breast cancer in women who have used OC’s at some point in their lives compared to never-users. As a frame of reference, cardiovascular diseases, including life-threatening blood clots or stroke, are commonly linked to the use of OC’s, but are actually less prevalent (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011b). Advertisements and news reports for birth control usually include information about these risks, but according to Hedenmalm and Sameulsson (2005), the incidence of contracting blood clots from using OC’s is only between 5.1 and 9.1 per million women (p. 910-912). If a woman’s breast cancer risk rises by 30% from taking hormonal birth control (Kumle et Al., 2002), it is a serious injustice that this link is not mentioned in the media. Considering the influence media has on society, especially through television (Postman, 2005), it is of much concern that these messages provide misleading information that affects so many women. In doing so, the media violates communication ethics by taking freedom away from women through unfair persuasion (Griffin, 2009; Habermas, 1998). Communication theorists advise the media to be more responsible when selecting information to publish (Glasser & Craft, 1996). This study examines the prevalence of unsubstantiated information about female hormonal birth control by measuring coverage of female birth control against coverage of similar options for men. Discovering and analyzing differences in how the media targets each gender provides a window into how the media and pharmaceutical industries use gender inequality to
pursue wealth. Okay but some mention of communication and theory should be here as in proposal. Maybe it is below.

Statement of the Problem

The media is a form of entertainment designed to draw in an audience (Potter, 2011). In order to do this, it must promote the agenda of the pharmaceutical companies who pay to air their advertisements on television (Potter, 2011). Media companies are quite successful at creating and maintaining audiences, and thus hold great influence over the information society receives. Not only do media networks decide which issues society considers important, but they also influence the ways in which individuals approach those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Therefore, it is essential to women’s health that the media publish accurate and balanced information about birth control.

In addition to the surface meaning of the words stated in news reports, these messages create a narrative through the use of recognizable symbols (Caputo, 1998). Even if harmful side-effects are mentioned, they are often overshadowed by images of attractive, successful people in appealing scenes. Pharmaceutical companies spend a large portion of their sales income using these messages to expand their market (Jost, 2010). However, these artistic tactics can affect the healthcare practices of consumers, as individuals diagnose themselves before visiting their physicians. For this reason, providing drug information directly to consumers, whether through advertisements or news stories, raises ethical concerns (Crigger, 2005).

Western medical research has traditionally been dominated by men (Harding, 1991), and the organizations which have the power to influence society’s image of the female body are still primarily made up of men. Therefore, what society knows about women’s health originates from the male perspective. According to feminist standpoint theorists such as Harding, it is not in the
financial interests of those in power to understand how their actions affect marginalized people. In this case, it is not in the best interest of the pharmaceutical companies to worry about whether or not women are receiving balanced information.

The majority of women have at least tried hormonal contraceptives (Mosher, 2004), and they deserve to know about the drug’s link to breast cancer. Instead of being misled by advertisements which portray a carefree lifestyle, they should be able to make an informed decision by weighing out benefits and risks. In light of these concerns, this study will measure the media’s presentation of breast cancer risk information against discussions about male birth control. Okay, but a bit more on comm. Make it stand out more.

Definitions of Terms Used

Hormonal oral contraceptives (OC’s) – birth control containing synthetic estrogen and progestins

Side-effect – any change to the body other than the drug’s advertised intent

Media elite – individuals who hold power in a large media corporation

Financial hegemony – pursuit of national or international wealth by dominating a particular market or markets

Female reproductive capabilities – anything pertaining to the woman’s role in human reproduction, including pregnancy and the menstrual cycle

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This study’s analysis of differences in the media’s approach to hormonal birth control across genders will be covered in five chapters. Chapter two reviews existing literature in order to provide the theoretical framework and rationale for the study. The scope and methodology utilized to collect and analyze data will be covered in chapter three. Chapter four then presents the results. In addition to relating these results to existing literature, this chapter will discuss the
meanings and cultural implications of the findings. Finally, chapter five will draw conclusions to the study, and present limitations and suggestions for further research.
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE Start each chapter on separate page.

In order to expand their clientele and monopolize the market, pharmaceutical companies spend as much as twenty percent of their sales income on marketing, (Jost, 2010). In contrast, the average manufacturing company spends less than one percent of its income on advertising. Although pharmaceutical advertising has many benefits, there is much concern over potentially misleading information, as well as health and cultural concerns (Crigger, 2005). Hormonal oral contraceptives (OC’s) are among the most popular medications advertised, and these widely-viewed commercials contain misleading information about health, while maintaining centuries-old gender biases.

Risks mentioned in television commercials for OC’s include blood clots, stroke and heart attack. Popular brands of OC’s do not mention breast cancer at all. A Bayer Group (2006) commercial for the combined OC, Beyaz, only mentions blood clots, stroke and heart attacks as “serious risks.” Seasonique and Yaz commercials list these same risks (Bayer Group, 2010, Teva, 2007). However, television discussion of male hormonal contraceptives, such as that seen on The View, elicits expectations of a risk-free drug (Smith, Kopf, McKiernan, Siege, Siegel & Gentile, 2011). This thesis will use Marxist and feminist criticism to compare media messages about hormonal OC’s to examine gender bias in the marketing of these drugs.

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

Contraceptive Marketing

Initially considered scandalous by the popular media, contraception gained popularly through women’s rights activist Margaret Sanger’s aggressive propaganda (Flamiano, 1998). At the time, the primary motivation behind the use of birth control was control of childbearing. However, according to Flamiano, very few news articles explained methods of birth control or
how to access those methods. Emotional appeal used in the media at the time presented birth control as necessary for the progress of civilization and for improving society. *The New Republic* argued that “man must make himself the master of his own fate” to enable “the making of a finer race,” (as cited in Flamiano, p. 562). *Harper’s Weekly* even suggested it must be beneficial if “‘men of high standing’” (p. 562) were in support of it. Therefore, women were exposed to propaganda without receiving information on how these methods might affect them in the long run.

According to University of Washington professor emeritus Thomas Nilsen, humans need to be able to make free and informed choices; taking away this opportunity through unfair persuasion invades the dignity of the person (Griffin, 2009, pp. 201-202). German philosopher and member of the “Frankfurt School” of critical theorists, Jurgen Habermas would consider this a violation of communication ethics (Habermas, 1998). According to Habermas, ethical discourse occurs when everyone affected by the situation in question has the opportunity to openly exchange points of view. Additionally, all must eventually agree to live by the decision. Under this theory, any culture can engage a diverse group of people in dialog, agree on a positive goal, and develop the wisdom necessary to reach that goal over the course of time (Griffin, 2009).

Glasser and Craft (1996) apply this theory to the American media by expecting journalists to be accountable to the public. They criticize the media for contributing to conversation about every subject matter except that of their own behavior. Rather than the media remaining separate from the public, Glasser and Craft believe it should engage in conversation about everything, including media practices. The propaganda for birth control during the first
half of the 20th Century did not provide balanced discussion but instead carried messages offensive to many people.

Advocates of women’s sexual freedom were quite outspoken about promoting birth control, but this message was slow to take effect and worried conservative individuals who feared not only the breakdown of the traditional family, but racial diversity as well (Benjamin, 2006). As the birth rate among white people declined during the 1920’s and 1930’s, this fear of diversity intensified and many wished to preserve what they believed to be the dominant race. Proponents of birth control used this to their advantage. Opposed to sexual liberation, “welfare feminists” endorsed birth control as a means to help women in traditional families raise “good children” into “good citizens” (p. 3). This group portrayed birth control as a method of racial cleansing, or eugenics. Although now considered unacceptable, eugenics was considered at the time to be a positive form of social change, and this rhetoric, combined with that of woman’s sexual liberation, proved quite successful.

The Media’s Influence

The media’s presentation of these attitudes reflected society’s beliefs at the time. Theorists have disagreed about whether media influences society or society influences media, but journalism professors Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw believe it is the media which sets the agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In studying media coverage of the 1968 presidential election, McCombs and Shaw applied their “agenda-setting theory” which describes the media’s role in influencing which issues society considers most important. The study confirmed that people base their political priorities on what they see on the news. The information presented is determined by the “media elite” which is made up of middle-aged Caucasian males who attend the same conferences and have access to the same journalistic research and dialog (Griffin, 2009,
Additionally, most of what the media presents comes from press conferences and press releases which are created by the subject of the story itself.

In addition to giving issues priority, McCombs says the media actually influences the way we think, a concept known as *framing* (Griffin, 2009) Not only do the media prioritize the issues, but it prioritizes attributes of the issues. Journalists and reporters can select which details to include in the story, and editors decide its length and prominence in relation to other stories. To take the influence of the media one step further, McCombs says it actually influences behavior. A graduate student of his conducted an experiment in which sales of travel insurance went up and airline ticket sales went down following media coverage of major plane crashes.

Likewise, media coverage of birth control influences how people use it. The 1960’s marked the first time in history when healthy people were prescribed prescription drugs for a naturally-occurring process (Mamo & Fosket, 2009). This pill was the combined oral contraceptive. Originally developed solely for the purpose of controlling birth, it had a high level of estrogen which caused several health concerns such as blood clots and heart attacks. As The Pill gained popularity for prevention of pregnancy, companies began marketing it for other uses, including menstrual suppression. Thus, women’s reproductive capabilities were medicalized. Fifty years after the release of oral contraceptives, the media still plays a role in setting the agenda for society’s use of this drug.

**Lifestyle Drugs and the Control of Nature**

Rhetoric used to sell OC’s has evolved significantly, but the underlying philosophies of power and control have not changed. The idea that nature is something to be controlled comes from the European Enlightenment Era of the 18th century (Sandoval, 2008). Rather than taking a holistic view of the body as did much of the rest of the world, scientists at the time divided the
body up into manageable components. Doing so separated the mind from the rest of the body. Sandoval argues that this disconnection from our bodies has caused us to desire an unhealthy control over nature.

Drugs taken by healthy people to target an undesirable aspect of life are called “lifestyle drugs” (Mamo & Fosket, 2009). These drugs, which blur the boundaries between science and society, include Viagra as well as drugs for obesity and male-pattern baldness (Lexchin, 2001). These conditions either occur naturally or are caused by lifestyle factors, and therefore are not true diseases. Recent marketing of OC’s has focused on menstrual suppression, a naturally-occurring process (Dean, 2009). Rhetoric used in advertisements for OC’s, however, treats pregnancy and menstruation as diseases.

A study by William Harvey in the early 1600’s provides us with one of the earliest examples of viewing the female reproductive capability as an illness (as cited in Sandoval, 2008, p. 8). At the time, reproduction itself was considered a disease; even today, women in many businesses must take “sick leave” when pregnant. Therefore, not only does direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) commercialize healthcare, but it also presents female reproductive capabilities as commodities by separating them from the female person.

**Theoretical Basis**

Bihn-Coss (2008) analyzes the multiple layers of meaning found in commercials for oral contraceptives, including what they are trying to sell, and what cultural messages are portrayed through them. At the surface level, these advertisements attempt to appeal to women who want to be carefree without having to worry about risks or menstruation. The second layer of meaning promotes convenience and responsibility. At the deepest level, commercials for OC’s portray the message that drugs and technology allow women to have complete control over their bodies, as if
they are a programmable piece of machinery. Thus, following the progression of this logic, menstruation and fertility come to be viewed as “diseases” that should be suppressed, as mentioned above. Ultimately, Bihn-Coss argues that these misleading messages are a result of the patriarchal domination of both scientific research and the media.

**Eco-Feminism and the Definition of “Normal”**

Sandoval (2008) and Bihn-Coss (2008) criticize history’s male domination of the healthcare field for defining the processes of the female body as dirty and uncontrolled. Because the pharmaceutical industry continues to be male-dominated, the naturally-occurring processes in the female body continue to be viewed as inferior. Eco-feminist philosophy seeks to repair this divisive approach to healthcare which began in the Enlightenment by uniting our minds with these natural processes.

The technological advances that have paved the way for lifestyle drugs have created a gray area between health and illness (Mamo & Fosket, 2009). Mamo and Fosket critique advertisements for Seasonale, focusing on the cultural implications and gender bias of suppressing menstruation to only four times per year instead of twelve. In order to promote their product, advertisers of Seasonale use subtle messages that contain large cultural implications. Instead of presenting menstruation as a naturally-occurring process, the commercials play on cultural implications that it is disordered. This message is hidden behind more direct statements of inconvenience and uncleanness. Ads for Seasonale target women’s thoughts, asking them to change how they think about birth control and menstruation. Mamo and Fosket (2009) argue that this rewrites biomedical and cultural ideas about what is natural.
Gendered Messages and Other Cultural Implications

Also present in the Seasonale campaigns is gender bias (Mamo & Fosket, 2009). In the 2003-4 advertising campaign, for example, these commercials feature women wearing white, to represent the confidence of no longer having a period every month. These commercials present women on this pill as clean, pure and sexy, implying that the only way to reach this natural state is to take Seasonale.

Although these commercials target pregnancy prevention only in subtext, male sexual partners do make appearances (Mamo & Fosket, 2009). These ads tell women to plan significant events involving sexual relations around their period. Thus, menstruation must be avoided in order for a woman to be considered clean and ready for intercourse.

Also misleading is the way in which many of these ads target women who have premenstrual dysphoric disorder, or PMDD (Sandoval, 2008). Although the disease affects only five percent of menstruating women, it can be easily misdiagnosed because of its vague description. The symptoms listed are difficult to distinguish from symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Sandoval argues that these ads further the agenda of male domination by turning the female body into a commodity that should be controlled.

Sandoval (2008) uses eco-feminist discourse analysis to examine these media messages which so greatly influence women’s health. Speaking from personal experience, Sandoval describes common motivations behind making a decision to see a medical professional. These decisions are largely based on what we perceive as normal, but our definition of normal is subjective. Television is the primary medium through which we arrive at this definition; however, we receive our televised medical advice in the form of commercials which are designed to sell a product rather than to inform.
The Literature

Television as Entertainment

Before television, people based their involvement in politics and society on ideas described through the written word (Postman, 2005). Now, with television’s bright colors, exciting sound effects and attractive people, rational ideas are more easily hidden behind entertainment. Whereas the written word inevitably encourages rational thinking (p. 51), the medium of television employs many other characteristics that affect viewers. For example, television images move very quickly so the viewer will not get bored and change the channel. Also, most messages on television are presented in a way that is simple and immediately entertaining. Even the news, through which many people learn about the world, is created in this way. The true purpose of television, then, is not to inform, but to entertain. Entertainment can be very fulfilling, but when this vehicle of entertainment becomes the primary medium through which people receive knowledge, views of reality become skewed.

According to Potter (2011), people have several levels of exposure which can determine how messages are processed. Messages can be viewed automatically, without the viewer’s awareness of the message, or they can be viewed attentionally. In the attentional state the viewer is able to process messages through the senses both physically and psychologically. However, people can sometimes be drawn so far into the message they experience it as reality. This is known as the transported state. A fourth state, the self-reflexive state occurs when people are very aware of processing a message and are able to question it in order to control their perceptions. This fourth state would be ideal; however, people tend to perceive television
messages as reality rather than entertainment. It is for this reason pharmaceutical advertising is so effective, but so misleading.

Although the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates commercials and requires them to provide a balance between positive and negative effects, by disclosing all side effects (FDA Prescription Drug Advertising Rule, 2011), the message might not reach the minds of consumers for many reasons. Main, Argo and Huhmann (2004) used content analysis to determine whether television advertisements for prescription drugs in the United States focus more on information or persuasion. They found that only about one-third of visual components in DTC ads provide rational appeal; much more focus is placed on emotional appeal. Main, Argo and Huhmann also cite research that shows emotional appeal in advertisements is much more effective than rational appeal.

**Television and Financial Hegemony**

The McDonalds fast-food chain has employed the use of recognizable symbols to create a shared culture worldwide (Caputo, 1998). This concept is known as “symbolic convergence theory.” Caputo uses this theory to explain how McDonalds has been able to successfully pursue global influence. To understand how pharmaceutical advertising has created its own culture we can study the meaning found in advertising signs such as images, sounds and other aesthetics. Known as “semiotics,” this study explains how a message elicits meaning beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. In the case of pharmaceutical advertising, healthy actors, peaceful music and appealing scenery cause the audience to link those attractive characteristics with the advertised drug. Even if the side-effects are mentioned at the end, the story of that drug is revealed in what the audience perceives. Caputo explains how McDonald’s commercials sell the American experience and cause people to want to buy their happiness. Likewise, pharmaceutical
advertising leads people to think they can buy their happiness in pill form. The cultural narrative told through pharmaceutical advertising has contributed to the desire of society to control nature. Some communication theorists would blame this misleading cultural narrative on abuse of power (Griffin, 2009).

Television is a business, designed to reach the largest possible audience through entertainment (Postman, 2005). To accomplish this, newscasters must be attractive, content must be entertaining, and ideas must be brief. Postman describes our television-centered culture as containing “the best-entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world” (p. 106). In order to grow as a business in the United States, broadcasting companies sell television spots to advertisers. To accomplish this, networks organize their programs so as to attract niche audiences which will likely be interested in certain types of products (Potter, 2011). For example, advertisers of women’s products are more likely to pay for commercial time during daytime talk shows than a broadcast of cage fighting. By essentially “renting out” the audience to advertisers, television networks grow financially and gain further influence in the media world. Because networks organize their programs according to the needs of the advertisers who have the money, it is ultimately the advertising companies which determine the messages presented on television.

During the 1900’s, the Frankfurt School critical theorists were skeptical of concentration and abuse of power, including its influence on media (Griffin, 2009). The group’s leaders, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, studied the ways in which these abuses have contributed to social inequality and skewed the meaning of freedom. Critical theorists believe the mass media numbs the public’s sensitivity to oppressive messages. Adorno, although hopeful, worried that people were relying increasingly on media to fill their minds instead of
internalizing the happenings of the world. Marcuse agreed and was skeptical of the social change that might occur from the media-reliant society. In fact, members of the Frankfurt School recognized the conundrum of meaningful and beneficial scientific research in a society as focused on financial gain as Western society (Tracey, 2003). New technology such as satellite television and the internet now spread culture faster than ever before.

Lowrey and Towles (1989) criticized the media’s representation of sexuality by citing research which shows television as the primary source of sex education for teenagers. Parents agree, but only 13% felt television portrayed accurate information (p. 347). In fact, Mitu (2010), considers television largely responsible for the education of society, particularly younger generations. It is through television that they learn about the world, but the messages they are receiving tend to focus on violence, murder, and sexual liberation. Mitu warns about television’s role in the proliferation of a consumer-driven society and, ultimately, globalization. The spread of influence of the pharmaceutical companies across the globe could lead to financial hegemony, or domination.

As the global race for financial hegemony grew after World War II, it expanded into the health sector (Iriart, Franco, & Merhy, 2011). Until the 1990’s, patients had to rely primarily on the advice of their physicians when making decisions about medication and other care. However, in 1997, the FDA loosened its restrictions on direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) of pharmaceuticals. The Food and Drug Administration Modernization Act lifted the ban on the mention of brand names in commercials and lightened requirements for the disclosure of side effects. This provided more opportunity for pharmaceutical companies to pursue wealth by using the media’s influence over consumers. Due to its prevalence and influence, pharmaceutical
advertising causes patients to pressure doctors for popular medications that might not be in their best interest (Jost, 2010).

**Abuse of Media Power**

Advertising’s role in commercialism is quite clear; however the news is much more misleading because people tend to trust it as fact (Potter, 2011). Instead of providing a balanced reflection of the day’s events, journalists construct narratives which are influenced by many factors including limited resources, media ownership, and audience interests. Although journalists may feel they have a responsibility to provide the audience with information that benefits society, the commercial nature of television dictates the necessity to generate a large audience. People are fascinated with stories that deviate from their own daily experiences, such as crime, danger or celebrity life. The irony with this, according to Potter, is people rely on the news to learn about what is normal, but are so influenced that they begin to view life through this sensationalized lens (p. 143).

Advertisements for women’s birth control affect the society’s views toward both the drug and femininity. Signs used in these commercials include healthy, attractive women who wear white clothing and dance around freely because they do not have to worry about pregnancy or menstruation (Mamo & Fosket, 2009). Although the text in the commercials may provide a relative balance between benefits and risks, the messages received by audience members are not balanced. The pharmaceutical companies’ use of the media to numb women into buying their products is a prime example of the “abuse of power” so feared by members of The Frankfurt School.

An emerging school of thought known as “feminist standpoint theory” seeks to explain these gendered media messages from a female perspective. Because the body of knowledge
which has emerged since the Enlightenment has been almost entirely derived from the male perspective, Harding (1991) is critical of modern science and philosophy. While Western thought is responsible for the comforts of the upper-middle class, it is also responsible for pollution and racism, as well as what society knows about health. Harding says these injustices “are entirely the fault either of politicians or of the industries that apply supposedly pure information in socially irresponsible ways” (p. 2). Contemporary science may be regarded as pure fact, or “truth,” however, feminists consider it a social problem. The media’s presentation of birth control as a healthy necessity is an example of this androcentric research.

**Rationale**

**Risks of Hormone Exposure**

Not only are the subtle messages in these ads maintaining a historical view that the female body is inferior, but women are exposing themselves to scientifically-proven risks which the ads fail to disclose. The FDA is responsible for regulating pharmaceutical advertising, however, the organization does not require pre-approval for these advertisements (FDA Prescription Drug Advertising Rule, 2011). This allows companies to sneak in misleading or incorrect information, which is only evaluated after the ad has aired (Lacasse, 2005). Examples of FDA law violations include misrepresenting data, overstating benefits, or mentioning unapproved benefits. Under this law, leaving out major risks is also a violation. Simply for lifestyle reasons, women are being manipulated by pharmaceutical companies to take drugs which are far from harmless.

Almost identical in composition to OC’s, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) was recently a popular method of dealing with the symptoms of menopause (Rossouw et al., 2002). However, the effects of any substance can take decades to show up in research. In a trial
involving 16,608 postmenopausal women, Rossouw et al. measured the effects of estrogen plus progesterone medications. The two primary outcomes were coronary heart disease and invasive breast cancer, and other effects included stroke, pulmonary embolism, endometrial and colorectal cancer, hip fracture, and even death due to unrelated causes. Originally, the study was planned to last 8.5 years, but the Data and Safety Monitoring Board stopped it after only 5 years. By this point, the occurrence of invasive breast cancer had exceeded the study’s stopping boundary, proving that risks outweighed the benefits.

Garad, Burger and Davison, (2011) contest this clinical trial, arguing that drops in breast cancer rates after cessation of HRT do not necessarily indicate a relationship between the therapy and cancer. And one of the authors of that article, Burger (2006) specifically targeted the Women’s Health Initiative study (Rossouw et al., 2002). However, Burger concluded that even women who had not used hormones prior to the trial showed at least a small increase in breast cancer risk. To investigate further, the Garad et al. (2011) article cites more recent research: Santen et al. (2010) confirms the risks of venothrombotic episodes, stroke, breast cancer, and even some ovarian cancer with use of estrogen plus progesterone HRT. Harvard Women’s Health Watch (2011) also confirms most of these risks, adding a few more. In fact, for women who use the estrogen plus progesterone HRT pill, the risk of breast cancer rises by 26% (p. 3).

**Contraceptives and Breast Cancer**

Combined OC’s contain estrogen and progesterone just like HRT, and research also indicates similar risks between the two (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2011). Many studies have found at least a slight increase in breast cancer risk (Kahlenborn, 2006, 2008), but clear numerical figures are often not revealed. And while the ACS (2011) clearly outlines the link between HRT and breast cancer risk, it is vague about the risks of hormone use in younger
women. A breakdown of hormonal factors in breast cancer risk is provided through. Menarche before age 12 and menopause after 55 are considered risks because these factors increase a woman’s exposure to reproductive hormones. In fact, the ACS mentions the role of elevated levels of estrogen can play in doubling a woman’s risk of breast cancer. Hormonal factors that reduce risk include younger age at first full-term pregnancy, greater number of pregnancies, and breastfeeding, all of which reduce a woman’s exposure to reproductive hormones. The ACS mentions lifetime hormone use as a risk factor, but only says recent OC use “may slightly increase” (p. 14) a woman’s breast cancer risk.

The Mayo Clinic Staff (2011a) considers a risk factor as “anything that makes it more likely you’ll get a particular disease,” and mentions significant factors including family history, obesity, alcohol, and HRT. Suggested, but unproven factors include tight-fitting bras, shift work and antiperspirants. No mention is made of contraceptives on the breast cancer page. The OC page does, however, mention that estrogen plus progesterone contraceptives “may worsen some cancers” including breast cancer (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011b).

The presentation of risks provided by WebMD is even more questionable. Although the popular Internet resource clarifies the role of estrogen in breast development, it denies any link between birth control pills and breast cancer (Wax, 2011).

The ACS (2011) describes a “high lifetime risk” of breast cancer as one which increases a woman’s risk by 20-25%, and a “moderately increased risk” as between 15% and 20%. Considering that the leading medical websites mention breast cancer as only a slight risk (ACS, 2011; Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011a; Wax, 2011), and the FDA requires disclosure of all major risks (FDA Prescription Drug Advertising Rule, 2011), it would make sense that a woman’s risk of breast cancer would be less than 15%. But according to current research surrounding television
commercials, a side effect described as “very common” only occurs in about 10% of patients (Cox, Cox, and Mantel, 2010). Some ads even mention side effects described as “rare.” Cox et al. found these effects usually occur in 0.1% of patients.

Current research indicates that breast cancer risk related to use of OC’s is between 24 and 30% (Collaborative Group, 1996; Kumle, Weiderpass, Braaten, Adami, & Lund, 2002). This is significantly greater than the ACS’s definition of “high lifetime risk,” which means women deserve to hear about it on television commercials.

**Summary and Hypothesis**

Feminists (Bihn-Coss, 2008; Harding, 1991; Mamo & Fosket, 2009; Sandoval, 2008) and communications scholars (Glasser and Craft, 1996; Habermas, 1998; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) would describe the media’s unbalanced representation of the effects of OC’s as a violation of communication ethics and an abuse of power on the part of the pharmaceutical companies who pay the media to present their messages. Given that scientifically-proven risks are left out of television messages about OC use for women, it would be valuable to know how the media responds to the idea of male contraceptives. My hypothesis is that the media provides more of a balance of risk information for male OC’s than for female OC’s, furthering androcentric perspectives on medicine. This thesis will conduct an analysis of the top four media conglomerates in the United States to compare the balance of risk information and gender bias presented in media messages for female versus male OC’s.

To provide an accurate and concise assessment of balance and bias in the news, research will be divided into six categories. These categories are as follows: (a) proportion of messages which mention OC’s as a risk factor for breast cancer, (b) proportion which deny a link between the drug and cancer, (c) proportion which consider birth control a method of cancer prevention,
(d) proportion of messages which do not mention negative effects, (e) proportion of news reports on male birth control which mention side effects, and (f) proportion which say male birth control should not have any side effects at all. Additionally, other patterns will be recorded, such as gendered or misleading messages. Chapter three will go over the scope of the study and will explain the methodologies utilized for collecting and analyzing data.
Chapter 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The Scope of the Study

Discovering gender bias in televised messages for drugs as widely-used as birth control (Mosher, 2004) is an important step in targeting gender inequality because of television’s influence on society (Postman, 2005). To accomplish this, two forms of media were used: television news broadcasts and news articles found on websites of major television networks. Women are exposed to advertising for hormonal birth control every time they watch television, and these messages contain many gender biases (Bihn-Coss, 2008; Sandoval, 2008). But male hormonal birth control has not yet been approved for market and therefore is not advertised. Even so, the public is receiving information about these drugs through television talk shows and news reports. Analyzing media messages about hormonal birth control for both men and women provided the most balanced interpretation available at this time. For the purpose of practicality and relevance, only messages dating back to 2002 were used. Contrasting media messages with prevailing research provided an analysis of whether or not coverage of the benefits and risks of hormonal birth control is balanced across genders.

Although televised newscasts are primarily created for entertainment, they are also the primary way in which people learn about the world (Postman, 2005). Taking a look at how hormonal drugs are presented on television showed similarities and differences between those which target women and those which target men. To provide the most accurate representation of which news messages are being viewed, the four major United States television networks were used. These networks include the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), CBS Broadcasting, Incorporated (CBS), and Fox News
Corporation (Fox). As the largest media networks, these four companies have tremendous influence on society.

The primary focus of the study was to analyze the presentation of breast cancer risk information in messages about female birth control. Additionally, discussion of benefits and risks of birth control for both genders was evaluated to establish similarities or differences in how these are presented to men versus women. Risks mentioned in the media were compared to risks found in clinical research. Language used to discuss each type of birth control was analyzed for the presence of stereotypes. Because television commercials often contain gender stereotypes (Bihn-Coss, 2008), it was relevant to take a look at which stereotypes prevail in messages about birth control.

Although recent political controversy has inundated the media with talk about contraception, the political focus of these messages is not relevant to this study. Some of these reports mention risks and benefits of the drugs; however, the presence of factual information in the political articles is small compared to the volume of media available. Therefore, it was practical to use only articles which employ a scientific representation of risks and benefits.

**Methodology of the Study**

To discover differences between academic literature and media messages about hormonal drugs, this study conducted a message-oriented content analysis of news and talk show reports which covered male and female hormonal contraceptives. Content analysis is a form of textual research which interprets media messages to discover underlying attitudes, biases and other themes (Rubin, 2010, p. 217). Not only can it help researchers find patterns of communication, but it can reveal characteristics about those who created the messages. In this case, the study seeks to outline gender imbalances which affect the information people receive about these
drugs. Because people receive so much of their information through television (Postman, 2005), the content of these messages represents the information society receives, regardless of the facts as found in academic research.

The pharmaceutical industry wields power over what is presented on television. But if the industry’s messages contain unsubstantiated information at the expense of consumers’ health, it is an abuse of power, and would be criticized by members of the Frankfurt School (Griffin, 2009). For this reason, Marxist criticism was employed to evaluate cultural implications in these media messages (Rubin, 2010). Feminist criticism was then utilized to explain gendered language and differences in how the media presents male versus female birth control. Combining the two approaches provided an outline of how gender imbalances are used by pharmaceutical companies to pursue wealth.

A qualitative analysis of each media message was conducted. This inductive method of inquiry allowed for interpretation of the many different details present in these messages. The qualitative analysis was conducted by observing each television spot or reading each article and recording relevant details. Details included breast cancer information, other risks, benefits and gender stereotypes.

To provide a clear and concise presentation of findings, these details made it easy to see a numerical outline of the differences between media messages. Lining up results in a systematic way made it possible to quantify gender biases and answer my hypothesis.

Research Design

Data Collection. Most news and talk shows were available on their network’s website. Additionally, some were accessed through YouTube or Hulu. A search for the term “birth control” brought up many articles and videos on each site. In order to narrow down content to
those containing relevant information, political messages were eliminated, as well as those which do not discuss the effects of estrogen and progesterone on the body. Messages about the morning-after pill were eliminated because this method affects the body differently. And hormonal birth control administered through a patch was also eliminated from the study because transdermal drugs work differently from oral drugs. Coverage of the Yaz lawsuit was eliminated because this drug uses a different progestin from other OC’s, and thus causes significantly higher risks (Drugwatch.com, 2012). Only messages which contained either benefits, concerns, or both were retained for analysis. Throughout the data collection process, notes were recorded to summarize the content, and detailed information was divided into specific categories aimed at measuring the balance of risk disclosure and gender messages.

**Data Analysis.** Categories of analysis included: (a) proportion of messages which mention breast cancer as a risk of taking OC’s, (b) proportion which say there is no risk of breast cancer from these drugs, (c) proportion which say birth control can prevent cancer, (d) proportion of those which leave out any information about side-effects, (e) proportion of news reports on male birth control which mention side effects, and (f) proportion which say male birth control should not cause any side-effects.

Disclosure of risk information was then compared across genders. Because the volume of media coverage of female birth control exceeds that for male options, these numbers were converted to ratios which represent the percentage of media messages which reveal each risk. If any language containing gender stereotypes was used to sell the product, this was also noted. Because conceptualization of qualitative research is a continual process, trends were recorded and evaluated throughout the research process (Neuman, 2003).
This detailed procedure provided a thorough and well-rounded examination of gender bias surrounding the promotion of birth control. In addition to gendered messages, many cultural implications can also be drawn from this study. Chapter Four will present the data and results, and will discuss the implications of the study.
Chapter 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

As mentioned previously, current medical research agrees on at least a slight increase in breast cancer risk from hormonal birth control (ACS, 2011; Collaborative Group, 1996; Kahlenborn, 2006, 2008; Kumle, Weiderpass, Braaten, Adami, & Lund, 2002; Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011a; Wax, 2011). Therefore, any news report which mentions side effects, but does not mention breast cancer, or even worse, specifically states there is no link between birth control and breast cancer is not providing the public with accurate information. In addition to this discrepancy, other deviations from fact were present in recent media messages. This study revealed the nature of these deviations as found in news articles and videos from the websites of NBC, CBS, ABC and Fox.

Data Analysis

News articles and videos from each network’s website were initially selected by title. Those which mentioned birth control in either the title or description were read to determine whether or not they were relevant. Both news reports and talk shows were included. Only reports about the effects of hormonal oral contraceptives were retained as a unit of analysis - political opinion and legal articles were eliminated. Articles and videos which discussed more than one type of birth control, but included OC’s were also retained. In addition to their own material, some networks post articles originally written through the Associated Press or Reuters. Although these do not originate with the television network, they are still associated with that network and were therefore retained for this study. In all, 68 articles and videos were analyzed.

Any news reports mentioning breast cancer were categorized according to how they link the disease with birth control, if at all. Throughout the qualitative analysis process, patterns were
observed. For the purpose of observing a balance between risks and benefits, promotional phrases were analyzed and recorded. Finally, messages about gender and the use of OC’s as a lifestyle choice were recorded. Of particular value to this study were those which reinforced stereotypes, or generalizations made about the behavior or nature of the opposite gender. Data was organized according to network, and a tally of the number of times each network reported on breast cancer was recorded.

For the purpose of determining which networks, if any, seem to value risk disclosure, it was necessary to categorize the news reports according to their degree of disclosure. Data analysis was organized into six content categories: (a) proportion of news reports which mention breast cancer as a risk of taking OC’s, (b) proportion which specifically say there is no risk of breast cancer, (c) proportion which say birth control can prevent cancer, (d) proportion of those which do not mention any negative side effects at all, (e) proportion of news reports on male birth control which mention potential side effects, and (f) proportion which say there should not be any side effects to male birth control. To answer the questions with these categories, the notes on each report were reviewed, and many articles and videos were viewed again for accuracy.

Results of the Study

This study provided insight into whether or not members of society who are exposed to the top four American media networks are well-educated on the link between hormonal birth control and risks such as breast cancer. Results were accomplished by outlining the proportion of website news reports which mention OC’s as a risk factor for breast cancer. Additionally, the study showed how often information presented in the media differs from scientific literature, and demonstrated the use of gendered messages in news reports.
Breast Cancer Risk

As shown in Figure 1, six of the 68 articles, or about 9% mentioned breast cancer as a risk, whereas 15% claimed there was no increase in risk. Ten of the 68 news reports, or 15%, do not mention any risks or side-effects of taking OC’s at all - they solely mention benefits.

Three FoxNews.com reports advertise cancer prevention in titles of articles about birth control (Associated Press, 2008; Newscorp Australian Papers, 2007; Cheng, 2008). However these titles are misleading because OC’s only reduce a woman’s risk of ovarian and endometrial cancer. Newscorp Australian Papers eventually mentions the increase in chances an OC user will contract cervical or breast cancer. However, the study reported by Cheng groups all cancers together and briefly mentions how a woman’s risk can increase after being on OC’s for 8 years.

![Figure 1. The risk of breast cancer in women who take OC’s as reported in network website news reports. Of the news reports which do mention breast cancer as a potential risk for women who take OC’s, the majority say there is no link between OC’s and breast cancer.](image)

In an even broader claim about the effects of birth control, Reuters (2010) entitles an article “Women Taking Birth Control Live Longer.” The news report claims British researchers found women on birth control less likely to die from any cause including cancer. However, the article itself is quite misleading. First of all, it cites an earlier report from the same study which
contradicts this recent report. Then the article explains a slightly higher risk of death in women under age 45 who are current or recent users. It is not until a woman has been free of hormonal birth control for 10 years that her risk disappears. The article proceeds to say birth control can reduce a woman’s risk of dying from heart disease, a claim easily refuted through reliable medical websites (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011b; WebMD Medical Reference, 2012).

Another article published on the Fox News website also claims OC’s can reduce life-threatening conditions caused by blood clots (WebMD, 2004). To support this, Wayne State University researcher Rahi Victory and his colleagues reanalyzed data from an earlier Women’s Health Initiative (WHI) study (Barad, Kooperberg, Wactawski-Wende, Liu, Hendrix, & Watts, 2006). The news article not only attempts to refute popular beliefs about the link between OC’s and blood clots, but states birth control has no effect on breast cancer.

Only two articles specifically reported on the link between birth control and breast cancer, and both were found on Fox News (WebMD, 2005, 2006). The 2006 article mentioned 21 of 23 studies confirmed the link and even claims breast cancer risk can increase by 44%.

**Male Birth Control**

Male birth control received significantly less media attention. After eliminating articles which focused on non-hormonal birth control, only seven remained. The majority of media messages about male birth control do mention at least the possibility of side effects, and only one does not mention any side effects at all: a rate of 14%. This almost matches the 15% rate at which messages for female birth control leave out side-effects. Two news reports said a major requirement of a male birth control pill would be to eliminate all side-effects.
Gender and Lifestyle

There were many correlations in the language used to discuss OC’s. A vast majority of messages about female birth control mention preventing pregnancy as one of the benefits, and several used the word “protect” when referring to pregnancy prevention. For example, the ladies on The View spent the majority of their show discussing the value of protection (Smith, Kopf, McKiernan, Siege, Siegel & Gentile, 2011b). Popular benefits mentioned include improved quality of life, as well as convenience, control, freedom, and options.

Other commonly-mentioned benefits of female OC’s as found in news articles and videos include prevention of acne, reduction of cramps, and protection against endometriosis. Even drugs which do not suppress menstruation are sometimes associated with control of menstruation for women whose cycles are painful or irregular to the point of interfering with life. One news article referred to menstruation as a “monster” (ABC Reporter, Lagorio, 2009). Some reports also mention the Pill can alleviate symptoms of menopause, although this is controversial.

Results by Network

Results differed slightly by network, as shown in Table 1. ABC and CBS each reported on the link between female birth control and breast cancer in 2009. However, in that same year, both networks published articles which denied the link. Fox also published contradictory articles. Of Fox’s 27 articles about birth control, four mentioned it as a risk and only 2 denied this risk: one in 2004 and one in 2012.

The majority of articles which mentioned breast cancer as a risk of OC’s were from Fox. If Fox carried the bulk of reports on breast cancer risk, NBC dominated the reports which denied a link between the drug and the cancer. Four of the ten articles which presented this misleading
Table 1

Percent of each network’s website news reports which fit into each breast cancer disclosure category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>NBC</th>
<th>CBS</th>
<th>FOX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breast cancer is a risk of OC's</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No risk of breast cancer from OC's</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OC's prevent breast cancer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention at least one side-effect of OC's</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information were through NBC. Most consistent in its reporting about birth control was NBC, although it also denied the link between OC’s and breast cancer. Only one report claimed birth control can prevent breast cancer, and that was found on the Dr. Oz Show website, which is filmed at NBC Studios (Wolf, 2012).

**Discussion**

Several network website news reports described the Pill as “safe,” but based on the results of this study, this is clearly unsubstantiated. Within reports which discuss hormonal birth control, many give misleading information about breast cancer, use gendered language, and promote lifestyle control. Messages targeting men and women also vary quite a bit.

**Misleading Information about Breast Cancer**

Of the articles that mention the link between OC’s and breast cancer, the only two which specifically focused on this link were published by Fox News (WebMD, 2005; 2006). The first describes the link between OC’s and HRT, and even considers hormonal drugs “carcinogenic to humans.” Specific citations are not listed in the news report, but these results are confirmed by
researcher Dr. Chris Kahlenborn who has published research for the Mayo Clinic (Kahlenborn, Modugno, Potter, Severs, 2006). Dr. Kahlenborn believes women deserve to know about this risk.

Glasser and Craft (1996) expect the media to be accountable by presenting accurate information, but several news reports used misleading titles, then provided contradictory information within the body of the message. The FoxNews.com reports which mention cancer prevention in their titles draw in their audience by using phrases which group all cancers into one category, and claim birth control can reduce cancer in general (Associated Press, 2008; Newscorp Australian Papers, 2007; Cheng, 2008). It is only after reading the entire article that the misleading title is exposed.

The research cited in the Fox News article which claims OC’s can reduce blood clot risk (WebMD, 2004) has since been criticized by other researchers. Fox News focused on researcher Rahi Victory’s reanalysis of an earlier WHI study. Victory’s reanalysis refuted the link between OC’s and blood clots, as well as the link between OC’s and breast cancer. However, Barad, Stefanik, Manson, Gass, and Anderson, (2006) later criticized Victory’s analysis of the WHI study, citing significant methodological differences between it and the original study (Barad & Kooperberg, et al., 2006). The variations in how the study was conducted caused such different results that Barad & Stefanik, et al. (2006) referred to Victory’s study’s limitations as a “failure of sound study design” (p. e14). Of the media messages analyzed in this present study, only Victory’s reanalysis was presented in the media; the subsequent criticism was absent.

Doctors are generally held to higher standards of credibility than are reporters. For this reason popular talk show host, Dr. Oz, should be trustworthy. However, the fact that he is the only show which reported that birth control prevents breast cancer (Wolf, 2012) shows how easy
it is for the media to get away with presenting misleading information under the guise of credibility. If the general public were to access the academic literature on this topic, it would expose Dr. Oz and similar news reports. A media-literate society would realize the entertainment value of television, and would seek professional medical advice from their physicians.

**Male Hormonal Birth Control**

Coverage of side-effects was balanced between reports for male and female birth control. However, although women seem prepared to suffer side effects in order to prevent pregnancy, several media messages listed the complete absence of side effects as a requirement for marketable male birth control. Side effects mentioned for male OC’s include minor discomforts such as pain, acne, and nausea. All are quite minor compared to the life-threatening side effects of female OC’s.

The most noticeable contradiction between presentations of female versus male birth control was seen on the popular talk show, *The View*. One episode discussed controversy over putting teenage girls on birth control (Smith, Kopf, McKiernan, Siege, Siegel & Gentile, 2011b). In the midst of opinion-based discussion, Elisabeth Hasselbeck brought up the popularity of hormone-free products and recent research about negative effects of hormones. She wanted to know how birth control might affect women long-term and mentioned cancer as an example. However, the conversation moved off the topic almost immediately without providing an answer. In Smith, Kopf, McKiernan, Siege, Siegel and Gentile (2011a), the ladies of *The View* discussed male birth control. Although the women brushed off conversation about the side effects of female OC’s, Whoopi declared male birth control would be an “enormous advantage if indeed there are no side effects.”
Gendered Language

According to existing literature, advertisements for birth control contain several layers of meaning, which affect society’s views of femininity and fertility (Bihn-Coss, 2008), and the news messages in this study are no exception. One of the most common phrases used in messages which favored birth control was to “protect” against pregnancy. Although the phrase “use protection” is often stated casually, several cultural implications can be hidden in its meaning. For example, Tanner (2011) advocates protection against “major psychological and economic consequences” of unintended children. Further research would be needed to determine the scientific accuracy of Tanner’s statement, however, there could very well be sociological implications in the way this message presents children as consequences against whom we must protect ourselves. Instead the media could promote sexual responsibility by using positive language which preserves the integrity of children. If Sandoval (2008) criticizes birth control ads for commodifying the female body, Tanner likewise reduces the dignity of children.

In promoting male birth control, one of the most common reasons mentioned is the shared responsibility between men and women. But media messages which advocate male birth control also used phrases which criticized women and female birth control, as well as phrases demeaning to men. For example, some news reports said women are ready to share the burden of birth control, and that men do not want any side effects. This description of female birth control is quite different from the free and convenient lifestyle described in many birth control ads. Although female birth control is promoted as contributing to women’s liberation and choices, one report about male birth control stated it should only be used by people in monogamous relationships (ABC News, 2011).
Lifestyle and Control

Many of the media messages promote the idea of control over female reproductive capabilities, whether it is control over fertility or menstruation. One article even uses the phrase “your lifestyle” in its title (Minaya, 2011), while another promotes menstrual suppression through “the ability to make periods a lifestyle choice, and not just a fact of life” (Lagorio, 2009). However, the same article by Lagorio counters the benefits of lifestyle choice by quoting women who are skeptical of manipulating nature. Some would prefer to “let nature run its course” and that eliminating menstruation seems “slightly unnatural.” Although many news reports used the word “control” as a tagline, those which presented more in-depth information tended towards skepticism of controlling nature. In an Associated Press article published by Fox News, University of New Hampshire sociologist Jean Elson advocates menstrual suppression for women who truly suffer during menstruation, but for healthy women, she says menstruation is “not a medical condition” and asks “Why medicate away a normal life event if we’re not sure of the long-term effects?” (Associated Press, 2007). Although the media is initially drawing in their audience by promoting control over nature, interviews quoted in the articles express skepticism.

FoxNews.com (2010) expressed concern over the aggressive marketing of birth control as a lifestyle drug. Edith Stein and Susanna Kim wrote a book entitled *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation*, which seeks to confront feelings of shame surrounding menstruation. The authors explain menstruation as a sign of a healthy female body. These messages line up with Mamo and Fosket (2009) by criticizing lifestyle drugs, but many news stories still promote the drugs as criticized by eco-feminists (Bihn-Coss, 2008; Sandoval, 2008). This evidence confirms the theories of Bihn-Coss and Sandoval which explain the androcentric view of research and its effect on society.
Corporate Media Ownership and Financial Hegemony

The ownership of media in America is concentrated in a few large conglomerates: NBC is owned by General Electric, ABC is owned by the Walt Disney Company, CBS is owned by Viacom, and Fox is owned by News Corporation (Moyers, 2003). The other top corporations in the United States do own media networks, however these four constitute the primary resources for news in America. Although it may seem we have a diverse selection of news outlets in this country, each is likely owned by one of these four.

Overall, Fox presented the most factual information about the link between OC’s and breast cancer, while NBC deviated furthest from fact. Of all four networks, CBS was most likely to include information about side-effects. And all networks included misleading information that could prove harmful to women who are not aware of the entertainment motives of the media.

Despite some differences, all networks used symbolism to construct stories for the purpose of drawing in an audience and persuading them to follow the media’s agenda. Women then feel their natural bodies are inferior to those portrayed in the stories and thus feel the need to buy the products despite life-threatening side-effects. In other words, the only way to alleviate the anxiety felt through these messages is to help pharmaceutical companies make money.

The news reports utilized in this study generally did not focus on pregnancy prevention, although that is the primary effect of OC’s. As more information becomes available about the negative effects of adding hormones to the body, and individuals attempt to lead a natural lifestyle, the pharmaceutical companies have to resort to more drastic methods to promote hormonal birth control. Chapter Five will analyze the underlying philosophical and theoretical implications of this work while discussing its limitation and suggesting further research.
Chapter 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSION

Limitations of the Study

Although all four television networks provided links to their recent articles and videos on their websites, conducting truly thorough searches proved rather complicated. Because links appeared to lose relevance after about ten pages, it is possible other articles or videos could have existed at the time of publishing. Also, the earliest media messages found only dated back to 2006, even though this study intended to examine a decade of material. Selecting relevant news reports and eliminating others presented a challenge because some messages, which were beyond the scope of the study, did contain a few relevant details. For example, some political articles did provide factual information, so it was difficult to eliminate them completely. Doing so was, however, necessary in order to respect time constraints. Overall, drawing a solid line around relevant media messages was a challenge.

Obtaining a truly balanced comparison between messages about male and female birth control was not possible because male hormonal birth control is not yet approved for sale, and therefore, not thoroughly researched. Additionally, news reports mention many proposed methods of male birth control which seek to avoid the use of hormones. This fact in itself provides a noticeable difference in messages about male and female birth control; however, inclusion of messages about non-hormonal birth control was beyond the scope of this study. Whereas female hormonal birth control is popularly consumed in pill form, proposed forms of male hormonal birth control differ significantly.

Recommendations

Further insight into society’s knowledge about the effects of hormones could be discovered by examining medical websites, blogs, and drug-specific messages. Internet
discussions might bring up topics which have not yet reached mainstream media. A separate study focusing specifically on political messages surrounding birth control could also be relevant because, although politics often do not cite medical references, audiences could nevertheless interpret these messages as factual information.

Results of a similar study might be valuable if conducted in other parts of the world where pharmaceutical advertising is not available or legal. It would be interesting to research whether popular opinion within these cultures is based on professional medical research or other sources. A comparison could then be made between the United States and other cultures.

Other forms of male and female birth control could be included in a larger study. Also, there may be more serious risks of male hormonal drugs than presented in this study, and factoring that information into the research could provide another angle.

**Conclusions**

Television messages about hormonal birth control vary as to how well they line up with medical research. Three of the four networks selected for this study presented contradictory information about breast cancer, and some even published opposing messages within the same year. Several articles used misleading titles and only provided balance briefly at the end of the article or video. If communications scholars expect the American media to be accountable to viewers (Glasser & Craft, 1996), these television networks do not seem to be getting the message.

The media sets the agenda for what society considers important; therefore, if news anchors prioritize a certain topic, television viewers will also consider it important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). If cancer prevention and menstrual suppression are covered enthusiastically at the beginning of a news report, and balanced health information is only briefly mentioned at the end,
the healthcare decisions of an inattentive audience will likely mirror these proportions (Potter, 2011). Likewise, if news reports were to make breast cancer prevention a priority, more of these articles would advise women to forego hormonal drugs in favor of natural options. Such a message would more closely resemble the media’s portrayal of male birth control. Overall, it appears the media considers hormonal drugs necessary for women, but advises men to seek healthier options.

Feminist standpoint theorists such as Harding (1991) question the media’s representation of the female body, as well as the science on which society relies for medical advice. Historical representations of the female body as disordered still prevail in contemporary news media. These messages tell women they must change their bodies if they want to be considered attractive, normal or successful. The results of this study support feminist criticism (Bihn-Coss, 2008; Harding, 1991; Sandoval, 2008) by exposing how the media favors healthy decisions for men, while hiding vital medical information from women.

By selling women on the idea that OC’s are healthy and risks are minimal, the American media is setting an agenda which supports the pharmaceutical industry rather than society. Although many products help facilitate the industry’s pursuit of wealth, there is a lot of money in birth control because fertility is nearly universal. Therefore, pharmaceutical companies can target almost half the population through media messages which promote female birth control. Exposing the reality of the link between birth control and breast cancer would greatly hurt the sales of OC’s; therefore it is in the best interests of the media elite to hide this information.

Failing to provide accurate, balanced information about hormonal birth control infringes upon women’s freedom to make informed choices. Thomas Nilsen would consider this an invasion of women’s dignity (Griffin, 2009, pp. 201-202), and Jurgen Habermas would say it
violates communication ethics (Habermas 1998). If the media wants to truly provide balanced messages, it should engage in conversation about its own practices (Glasser & Craft, 1996), particularly those found in this study. In this way, the media could take a step toward the accountability desired by communication theorists by providing women with balanced, factual information so they can make their own informed choices.

In pursuit of wealth, the media and pharmaceutical companies work together. Their failure to disclose risks and present balanced information, as proven by this study, marginalizes women by keeping them misinformed. Rather than empowering women, this biased approach to financial domination will likely contribute to further inequality (Griffin, 2009). This study is just one attempt to help break down the barrier between society and the media elite.
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