

**The abortion debate in a Mexican online forum:
Globalization, religion, and politics**

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ABSTRACT

The globalization of information and communications has shaped and influenced the abortion debate in Mexico. In recent years, abortion has risen on the Mexican public agenda and policymakers have seriously considered and implemented legal reforms liberating abortion laws. In March 2006, at the height of a presidential campaign, *El Universal online* hosted an online forum asking readers what they would ask presidential candidates about abortion. Two investigators analyzed a sample of 245 comments. Of these, 40% were pro-choice, 30% anti-abortion, 12% mixed opinion, and 18% unknown opinion. Arguments by pro-choice readers were that legal abortion is a hallmark of modern secular society and can prevent maternal mortality and unwanted children, whereas anti-abortion comments equated abortion to murder. Readers on both sides of the abortion debate supported increased education about and access to contraceptive methods, and those that opposed abortion did not cite religious arguments in justifying their positions. This online forum provides a case study of how the international abortion debate manifests itself among influential newspaper readers in Mexico, the second largest Catholic country in the world.

INTRODUCTION

For the past half-century, the globalization of information and communication has had a profound effect on women's reproductive health and rights around the world. Even in the predominantly Catholic, socially conservative country of Mexico, global advocates of reproductive rights applaud recent legal reforms that have liberalized highly restrictive abortion laws (Grupo de Información en Reproducción Elegida, 2005). International population policy debates have increasingly become articulated at the local level in Mexico, as the dramatic growth in communications technology in recent years has led to unprecedented information-sharing across geographic boundaries. In their 1999 article on the effects of globalization on the efforts to decriminalize abortion in Mexico, Bernal, Bissell, and Cortés described how the globalization of information and communications has shaped and strengthened the Mexican abortion rights movement, allowing women's health advocates to reach broader audiences, define consistent advocacy strategies, and exchange knowledge and information (Bernal, Bissell, & Cortés 1999). Furthermore, the emergence of the Internet in Mexico in the 1990s (Islas & Gutiérrez 2000) led to the creation of a public sphere in which like-minded advocates could strategize and exchange ideas, the general public could learn about the various arguments and counterarguments surrounding the abortion debate, and opposing parties could engage in open debate in fora such as message boards and chat rooms.

In this article, we analyze comments posted by readers of the Mexican newspaper *El Universal* in an April 2006 online forum aimed at eliciting participant opinions on what they would ask Mexican presidential candidates about abortion. Although there is an abundance of Mexican abortion opinion research that has been conducted in the past 20 years (Yam, Dries-Daffner, & Garcia, 2006), our rationale for analyzing abortion opinion expressed in an online forum lies in the potential for such computer-mediated discussion to draw participants of differing opinions into debate, exposing them to opposing viewpoints in a non-threatening environment. In her qualitative study of participants in Usenet and Yahoo message boards, Stromer-Galley (2003) suggests that the Internet enables public spaces for political conversation, noting that message board participants learned from exposure to diverse opinions, which allowed them "to use the Internet as a channel into public discussion forums they either do not seek or cannot find in their offline lives (Conclusion section, ¶6)." Much has been written about the potential of the Internet

to foster and revitalize participatory democracy, engaging citizens to participate in political conversation on controversial issues such as abortion (Schneider, 1997). We were interested in how this new medium was used by Mexican online newspaper readers to express their views on a particularly timely and polemical topic. Previous research by Robinson (2005) has described online fora as “excellent settings for studying how diverse types of naturally occurring discourse evolve among people personally unknown to each other (September 11th and the Internet section, ¶1),” and very little is known about Internet discourse in non-Anglophone fora. Furthermore, given that 44% of Mexico’s 22.7 million Internet users report having participated in some type of Internet discussion in the past six months (Asociación Mexicana de Internet, 2007), computer-mediated communication appeals to a substantial proportion of the Mexican online population and these venues have the potential to play a role in increasing citizen participation in political discussions in this fledgling democracy. To what extent do participants in this Mexican online forum demonstrate a diversity of perspectives, the type of political deliberation described by Stromer-Galley (2003) as essential to democratic practice? How does this online abortion debate differ from or reflect findings from previous Mexican abortion public opinion studies?

In the analysis presented below, we begin with an overview of globalization and international population policy to set the stage for a discussion of how this global debate manifested itself at the local level in a Mexican online forum. To that end, we also include a discussion of abortion policy in Mexico as well as an introduction to the role of the Mexican news media in the local abortion debate. Finally, we present our findings from a content analysis of newspaper readers’ abortion opinions in an online forum hosted three months before the July 2006 presidential elections in Mexico.

Globalization, international population policy, and abortion

Globalization is often conceptualized in economic terms, characterized by an integrated global economy and increased international free trade, which in turn has resulted in cultural flows that expose consumers worldwide to a broader array of products, ideas, and political systems. This phenomenon facilitates not only the diffusion of material goods and popular culture, but also the exchange of values and ideals that can shape international development priorities. In their analysis of the globalization of the international population agenda, Luke and Watkins (2002)

describe the cultural diffusion of international population policy as an example of how Western countries – particularly the United States – instigated and influenced the international population agenda in the 20th century, defining priorities across national borders and informing national family planning policies of developing countries around the world.

Beginning in the 1950s, Western demographers alarmed by population explosions in developing countries argued that these high growth rates needed to be curbed in order to avoid food shortages, depressed economic development, and civil and political instability. This neo-Malthusian world view gained favor among European and American intellectuals and private donors, eventually influencing policymakers in the major Western donor countries. The U.S. government, following Sweden's lead, began including population grants in its foreign aid programs in 1966, soon to become the largest source of Western population assistance (Sinding, 2000). United Nations agencies such as the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the United Nations Population Fund also institutionalized population control policies. By the 1990s, the majority of developing country governments had established demographic targets for reducing fertility and, due largely to family planning funding from multilateral and bilateral donors, fertility declined dramatically around the world (Luke & Watkins, 2002). In Mexico, for example, fertility decreased from more than seven children per woman of reproductive age in 1970, to three children per woman of reproductive age in 1994 (Partida Bush, 2004).

After decades of population control policies informed by the neo-Malthusian movement, the international population agenda underwent a dramatic paradigm shift at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, attended by more than 4,000 delegates from 180 countries. The event culminated in the production of a 113-page Programme of Action intended to inform international population policies over the next 20 years. In an effort to diminish the importance of population stabilization and instead promote gender equity and reproductive rights, Western feminists played an unprecedented role in advocating for the protection of broader reproductive health needs. As a result, the final Programme of Action abandoned the rhetoric of population control and demographic targets, instead adopting a rights-based approach to reproductive health. This more comprehensive vision that went beyond family

planning and also recognized other critical needs, such as the importance of preventing sexually transmitted infections, eliminating unsafe abortion, and improving the status of women (Cohen & Richards, 1994; Luke & Watkins, 2002; Sinding, 2000).

Of particular interest to the 4,200 journalists covering the ICPD was an extensive debate over the abortion language in the final document, a heated discussion that pitted pro-choice Western feminists against conservative religious leaders allied with the Vatican. For the first time at an international governmental meeting, the issue of abortion was discussed at length on the world stage, with Holy See representatives vehemently objecting to ICPD commitments to, for example, nonpunitive post-abortion care. In the end, reproductive rights advocates succeeded in incorporating language into the Programme of Action that explicitly recognized unsafe abortion as a major public health concern. In addition, the document stated that women should have access to quality services to manage abortion complications, including post-abortion counseling and family planning services. The Programme of Action went on to assert that in circumstances where abortion is not against the law, such abortion should be safe. (Cohen & Richardson, 1994; ICPD, 1994).

More than a decade after Cairo, there remains staunch resistance to ICPD agreements on the part of the Vatican, conservative Muslim nations, and, more recently, the U.S. government. However, the bold new vision codified in the ICPD Programme for Action continues to be held up as a watershed moment for international population policy, and the Western pro-choice movement's arguments and rhetoric strengthened and emboldened reproductive rights activists in the global South. In the following analysis, we present a case study of how the above described population policy debates on a global level were manifest at the local level in Mexico, a Catholic country characterized some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2007).

Abortion politics in Mexico

Mexico, the world's second largest Catholic country (Adherents.com, 2000), has some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world, a situation that leads many women to resort to unsafe, clandestine abortions – whether self-induced or at the hands of unskilled providers. As a tragic

consequence, abortion complications are the fourth leading cause of maternal mortality in the country (CONAPO, 2000). Abortion law in Mexico varies by state, and the only circumstance under which abortion is permitted in all 32 jurisdictions is in cases of pregnancy due to rape (GIRE, 2005). Even in cases when abortion is theoretically decriminalized (such as in cases of rape), women face many barriers to obtaining legal abortion care, largely due to a lack of mechanisms or guidelines regulating abortion services in the rare cases when the procedure is permitted (Lara, Garcia, Ortiz, & Yam, 2006).

Mexican opinions on abortion are nuanced and circumstantial. A national survey of 3,513 men and women aged 15 and over – 82% of whom were Catholic – found that whereas 26% opposed abortion under all circumstances and 12% supported abortion under all circumstances, the majority (57%) stated that their opinion on abortion depended on the circumstance. For example, Mexicans demonstrated the most support for abortion when the woman's life was at risk (69%); in cases of rape (65%); when the woman's health was at risk (64%); serious fetal malformation (56%); or incest (51%). However, few supported abortion in case of lack of financial resources of the woman (12%), when the pregnancy results from contraceptive failure (10%), or upon the request of the woman (13%) (Ipsos Bimsa, 2006).

The majority of Mexican abortion laws date to the 1930s, but in the final decades of the 20th century – coinciding with the rise of organized pro-choice movements in developed countries, as well as the call to uphold reproductive rights at ICPD – the country witnessed some incremental changes that liberalized abortion laws in a handful of jurisdictions. In addition, Mexican affiliates and sister organizations of international pro-choice nongovernmental organizations such as Catholics for a Free Choice and Center for Reproductive Rights collaborated with grassroots feminist groups such as Grupo de Información en Reproducción Elegida (GIRE) in advocating for safe, legal abortion in Mexico. In April 2007, after months of intense public debate between various political parties, feminist organizations, and Catholic officials, the Mexico City assembly voted to decriminalize abortion in pregnancies of up to 12 weeks of gestation. In May 2007, in response to allegations by the National Human Rights Commission and the National Attorney General's office claiming that the reform is unconstitutional, the Supreme Court has agreed to hear the case and rule on its constitutionality later this year. Feminist organizations regarded the

Mexico City reform as a reproductive rights victory that was largely unforeseen several years ago. For example, in a 1999 article on the effects of globalization on efforts to decriminalize abortion in Mexico, Bernal and colleagues (1999) wrote that “the scenario for gaining any changes in Mexico City’s Penal Code regulating abortion is still grim (p. 132).” In the late 20th century, although the Mexican feminist movement had benefited from global communications technology, which allowed them to strategize and establish priorities in tandem with their international counterparts in the aftermath of fora such as the ICPD, the stigmatization of abortion by powerful Catholic officials hindered efforts to increase Mexican women’s access to safe, legal abortion (Bernal, Bissell, & Cortes, 1999). What arguments shaped the debate leading up to the monumental vote to decriminalize abortion in the country’s capital? To begin to answer this question, in the following sections we provide a brief overview of the Mexican news media, followed by an analysis of the abortion opinions expressed by newspaper readers of an online discussion forum.

Mexican news media and abortion politics

In the past decade, the once taboo topic of abortion has earned an unprecedented place on Mexico’s public agenda, with politicians, journalists, and advocates openly engaging in impassioned debate about this contentious and polemical issue. The convergence of various factors in recent years has fostered an environment in which stakeholders on all sides of the abortion debate are making their opinions known and calling on policymakers to take a public position. For example, Mexicans experienced a landmark political event in 2000, when President Vicente Fox’s electoral victory ended seven decades of authoritarian one-party rule by the defeated Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), a democratic transition that has led to heightened awareness of the power of the vote and civic participation. Similarly, much has been written about the rise of the Mexican free press since the early 1990s, with prominent media outlets making concerted efforts to provide balanced news coverage rather than merely echoing the positions of the sitting government (Hughes, 2006; Lawson, 2002).

During the political campaigns leading up to the July 2006 election of President Felipe Calderón over runner-up Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in the closest presidential election in Mexican history, various media events and advocacy strategies underscored the salience of

abortion as a public policy issue and demonstrated the active role international feminist and human rights organizations were playing in the Mexican pro-choice movement. On March 8, 2006, the global watchdog organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) released an internationally publicized report criticizing Mexican health and government officials for denying Mexican rape victims access to legal abortion (Human Rights Watch, 2006). The following day, the Mexican government announced a landmark settlement with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in the case of a 13-year-old pregnant rape victim, 'Paulina,' to whom Mexican authorities had denied an abortion in 1999. The Mexican government agreed to pay Paulina reparations and to issue guidelines regulating access to legal abortion for rape victims in all states (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2006). As an example of evolving advocacy strategies, for the first time, influential Catholic officials held private meetings with candidates and organized voter workshops to inform the electorate about candidates' opinions on abortion (Orlandi, 2006).

By the closing months of the 2006 electoral campaigns, the presidential contest had been defined as a two-party race between Calderón (of former president Vicente Fox's conservative National Action Party, or PAN) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the former Mexico City mayor (of the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD). While Calderón took a firm anti-abortion stance (PAN, 2006), López Obrador was more equivocal, stating that a public referendum should determine whether to decriminalize abortion (Watson, 2006). Although López Obrador had been the electoral favorite during most of the campaign, Calderón took the lead in the polls during the final months, ultimately winning the July 2006 election by a margin of 0.56% of the vote. In Mexico City, PRD candidate Marcelo Ebrard won the capital governorship with 52% of the vote (Castro, 2006).

Capitalizing on the timely political relevance of the abortion debate, from March 12-16, 2006 – four months before Mexicans were to elect former president Vicente Fox's successor and one week after the media events regarding the HRW report and the settlement in the Paulina case – the Mexico City-based national newspaper *El Universal* hosted an online forum on the publication's website, *El Universal online*, which asked readers to post responses to the question, "What would you ask the presidential candidates about abortion?" The online availability of this forum presented a first-of-its-kind opportunity to explore Mexican newspaper readers' abortion

opinions and discourse. To better understand *El Universal online* readers' perspectives on the issue, we conducted a qualitative study analyzing reader comments posted to this forum. Our aim was to document the specific abortion arguments and images employed by Mexican online newspapers at the height of a presidential campaign, one year before the Mexico City assembly would take the unprecedented step of removing legal restrictions on first-trimester abortions.

METHODOLOGY

By analyzing reader postings to an online discussion forum hosted by a national newspaper, we sought to begin to answer the following research question: What do Mexican online newspaper readers think about abortion and how do they express their opinions on this controversial issue? The following sections provide background on the data analyzed as well as the specific analytical methods employed.

***El Universal online* forum**

The online discussion forum that we analyzed was hosted by the Mexican newspaper *El Universal*. Founded in 1916, *El Universal* is Mexico's oldest and largest newspaper, with an estimated circulation of 100,000 (Lawson, 2002). In 2001, the newspaper launched the free website *El Universal online*, which receives more than 201,000 unique visitors daily (El Universal, 2006). In a section of the website titled "Discussion," *El Universal online* hosts weekly fora covering various topics suggested by both editorial staff and readers, ranging from the arts to health issues to current events. *El Universal online* reserves the right to eliminate insults and obscenities.

In spring 2006, at the height of the presidential race, fora often addressed campaign issues of interest, with questions asking readers to pose questions to the candidates on topics such as corruption, job security, and crime in Mexico. From 9:50 PM on March 12, 2006 to 6:39 AM on March 16, 2006, a weekly forum of *El Universal online* invited readers to respond to the question, "What would you ask the presidential candidates about abortion?" During this time a total of 276 responses were posted to the website and the forum received 6,928 hits, earning it the distinction of being among the "most read" and "most commented" fora of the week. Those who entered the forum website – whether to post a comment or simply to read its content – were able

to read all previous postings. *El Universal online* did not post any socio-demographic or identifying information on readers who participated in the forum. Nevertheless, previous Mexican media studies provide a general idea of the characteristics of Internet users as well as newspaper readers. For example, of the 25% of Mexicans with Internet access, 41% have some college education (compared to 16% of the general population), and 83% are age 34 or under (compared to 62% of the general population) (AMIPCI 2005; AMIPCI 2007). In addition, just 10-15% of Mexicans read newspapers or magazines, but Mexicans who read such print media are generally the nation's elite, including opinion leaders and policymakers whose influence is disproportionate to their numbers (Lawson, 2002).

Analytical methods

Two investigators read all 276 postings and, after excluding irrelevant commentaries that did not address the discussion question, continued with this study of 245 entries. These entries were then classified into one of four categories: pro-choice, anti-abortion, mixed opinion, and unknown opinion. Pro-choice commentaries expressed unequivocal support for abortion, and anti-abortion commentaries expressed unequivocal opposition to abortion. Mixed opinion commentaries expressed circumstantial support for abortion (for example, only in cases of rape). Finally, those categorized unknown opinion made comments on the issue, but did not express a clear position in favor of or in opposition to abortion. In addition, the two investigators identified major themes or arguments that emerged from the commentaries. Reliability was assessed at 98 percent across all coded entries. All entries were translated into English by the investigators.

RESULTS

Most of the entries reviewed expressed a solid opinion, either as pro-choice (40%), or as anti-abortion (30%). The remaining were mixed opinion (12%) or unknown (18%). In the sections that follow we provide a more detailed description of the major themes and arguments presented in each of these four categories.

Main themes in pro-choice responses

Below we present the main themes identified in the pro-choice comments posted to the *El Universal online* forum. These include abortion as a woman's private decision (47% of all pro-

choice comments); prevention of unwanted children (24%); prevention of maternal mortality (19%); and abortion being equated with modernity (16%). These thematic areas were not mutually exclusive since one entry could refer to more than one theme.

Abortion as a woman's private decision

In the pro-choice responses, the most commonly mentioned theme was the woman's right to make a private decision about abortion. One respondent wrote that "the person who decides should be the woman, the woman, and only the woman." Another asserted, "[I]t is our body and, moreover, it is our life and future." Similarly, many resented the influence that male presidential candidates, priests, and doctors have over a woman's decision to have an abortion, questioning, "Why do men make decisions that concern women?"

Those supporting a woman's private decision to have an abortion also emphasized that it was not a decision that women take lightly. For example, "Women don't abort for fun. It is not like frying a tortilla every so often. But we have the right to choose." Wrote another reader,

Abortion is a strictly personal decision. Penalizing abortion is like covering the sun with a finger; it is a huge hypocrisy. It is something that exists, that many women practice in lamentable conditions in the majority of cases. Depenalizing it is not encouraging it. No one aborts for sport and it is an incredibly difficult situation for women.

Finally, some pro-choice readers viewed abortion as one of many options that should be available to women. Wrote one reader,

The mission, therefore, should be to not obligate a woman to have a child she does not want, but to give her options, abortion, morning-after pill, contraceptive methods, legal measures to be able to put the child up for adoption in a prompt manner, etc.

Criticism of religion's role in abortion debate

Another common theme among pro-choice commentaries was a strong criticism of the role of religion in the abortion debate. Many such comments took the form of support for the separation

of church and state, as codified in the Mexican Constitution. One reader wrote, “The institutions that shouldn’t intervene are the Churches. It surprises me how many women profess faith in some religion that has been the instrument and pretext for limiting their human rights.” Another posed the question, “How do you think our lay state would be respected if our laws and public policies responded more to the leaders of the Catholic hierarchy and less to the realities of 53 million Mexicans?” Finally, one pro-choice reader exhorted candidates to “go to mass less and read a little more.”

Since presidential candidate Felipe Calderón’s political party, the National Action Party (PAN), is closely associated with the Catholic Church, several readers singled him out in criticizing the influence of Catholic doctrine on his political positions. For example, one reader wrote,

Ay, Calderón, you thought that by declaring your opposition to abortion you were going to win the sympathy of 80% of Mexican Catholics, and with that you would win. But you were mistaken and the public is not going to let itself be carried by obsolete and outdated Catholic doctrine. We are in the 20th century, a century of liberties, when [obscurantism is] part of the past, a past that nobody – except you – wants to return.

Prevention of unwanted children

Another common argument among pro-choice respondents was the need for legal abortion to prevent the birth of unwanted children, particularly those who would become *niños de la calle* (street children). One respondent asked why abortion opponents do not spend more time on programs helping street children, claiming that “supporting orphans and street children is a better way to defend life and be a Christian than persecuting innocent women.”

Others focused on the poor quality of life that unwanted children experience and the bleak future that awaits them. The following comments from two pro-choice respondents illustrate this argument:

Which suffering is worse? The induced abortion of an unborn child, or the suffering derived from the lack of basic rights like housing, education, nourishment and provoked by physical, sexual or emotional abuse...and the lack of love and care that is suffered by unwanted children?

In our country an unwanted child is a child without hope that will have a poor upbringing in all senses...that invariably will lead to his transformation into a dangerous individual for our own society.

Prevention of maternal mortality

Many pro-choice responses cited abortion-attributable maternal mortality as an argument for legalizing abortion. One reader questioned how candidates can support “the ideology and laws that permit the deaths of thousands and thousands of women.” Another reader stated, “We are not talking about whether it is moral or not, nor your personal opinion. Unfortunately [abortion] exists and thousands of women die going to a quack or a fake doctor or whomever.”

Other readers argued that making abortion illegal did not stop it from happening and the illegality made its practice more dangerous. Wrote one reader, “The truth is that women who decide to abort will do it legally or illegally. The difference is illegally there are lots more risks for them, so I think that legalizing abortion is the most sensible.”

Abortion equals modernity

Several pro-choice readers argued that in order for Mexico to develop into a modern, “first world” country, it must follow the lead of developed countries and liberalize abortion laws. One person wrote, “In every modern country women have the right to choose. Mexico does not have a reason to be the exception.” Another contributed, “We are in the 21st century and not in the 19th. [In Europe and Canada] abortion is a right....In those countries they have the highest index of...defense of human rights.”

One reader compared abortion prevalence in Mexico to that of developed countries in arguing that legalization of abortion would not increase abortion rates: “In first world countries in Europe, abortion is permitted and paradoxically there aren’t as many abortions as in Mexico.”

Several readers also emphasized that even in some developed countries with strong religious traditions and influences, abortion was permitted. Wrote one reader, “In all first world countries it

is legal, including in Italy, the cradle of Catholicism.” Added another, “In those [developed] countries people have religious beliefs, but there is no need to traumatize a woman so she has a child like Paulina did.”

Major themes in anti-abortion responses

Many comments were classified as anti-abortion, as they expressed opposition to abortion with no exceptions. Below we present the major themes utilized by readers who posted anti-abortion comments to the forum: abortion is murder (58% of all anti-abortion entries); abortion prevents the birth of quality people (5%); and irresponsibility of abortion (27%).

Abortion is murder

Many anti-abortion comments cited arguments equating abortion with murder, by far the most frequently mentioned argument cited in opposition to abortion, with a common image being that of the fetus as a defenseless victim. For example,

Abortion is the murder of a person who cannot defend oneself. It is the same as killing an old man in a wheel chair; the only difference is that we cannot see it...A society that is said to be advanced cannot allow its smallest, defenseless people to be hurt.

The worst criminals have a right to defend themselves and those are people that, once deemed undesirables, are condemned to death, and that makes it as painless as possible. [But] the unborn who have no defenses are killed in a cruel and painful manner.

According to several anti-abortion responses, all fetuses, regardless of the circumstances of the pregnancy, are human beings who have the right to be born. More specifically, a respondent argued that “defenseless creatures are not to blame for the irresponsibility of our base passions.” In the case of rape, one respondent insisted that “the rapist should be killed. It is not the baby’s fault!”

Abortion prevents births of quality people

Several respondents unequivocally opposed abortion because the pregnancy terminated could have led to the birth of a valuable and quality person, such as musical prodigies or scientific geniuses. The following comments employed such arguments:

I just found the perfect president for this country. He is not capable of being corrupt, one of the best economists and thinkers in history, a superior politician. I ask myself, 'Why doesn't he run for office?' For one simple reason: He was the product of a rape and they aborted him, the same thing that happened to the person who was going to find the cure for AIDS and the one who was going to achieve global disarmament. If only they were here.

What would you do if you found yourself in [this situation]? The father is asthmatic, the mother has tuberculosis. They had four children, the first is blind, the second deaf, the third is dead and the fourth has tuberculosis. The mother is pregnant again....Would you recommend an abortion? If you answered "yes"the world would never have known Ludwig van Beethoven.

According to some anti-abortion readers, supporters of abortion were out of line because they themselves were once fetuses. For example, one person asked, "If your mother had faced one of many reasons to abort, would you agree that she should have opted to take you out of her body like something that doesn't work?" Wrote another, "Just think about it and you'll discover that due to life's ironies, those who are in favor of abortion are [alive and] enjoying this world!"

Irresponsibility of abortion

Another common theme throughout the anti-abortion responses was that those who resort to abortion are irresponsible not only for resorting to abortion, but also for getting pregnant in the first place. Arguments falling under this category included mention of the range of contraceptive methods available to prevent unwanted pregnancy:

The depenalization 'per se' of abortion is ethically immoral...especially when so many contraceptive methods exist: pills, foams, injections, intrauterine devices, and even the morning-after pill.

[F]amily planning should be promoted immediately. A woman who says that it is her body and her decision is immature and does not know how to take care of that body and therefore became pregnant. The solution: promotion, support, resources. Enough!

Anti-abortion readers also felt that those faced with an unwanted pregnancy should take responsibility for their actions and give birth to the child. For example, one reader stated, *To kill (or abort) has become part of the daily language of those who - using the justification 'it's my body' - kill human beings...to free themselves of the responsibility of loving, having, maintaining, raising, and educating a child and who, at the moment of satisfying their [base] instincts didn't think, but then later looked to silence the voice of their conscience and convince themselves and others that they acted with 'justice' because 'how can we bring to the world someone who will suffer?'*

Other anti-abortion comments cited the availability of options other than abortion when a woman is faced with an unwanted pregnancy, such as adoption. For example, wrote one reader, “There are couples that are anxious to be blessed with a child...so why not give the child up for adoption instead of abort?”

Mixed opinion responses

Unlike the pro-choice and anti-abortion comments, which did not make exceptions to their positions in support of or in opposition to abortion, some comments were classified as “mixed opinion,” because they expressed circumstantial support for abortion depending on the circumstances, generally agreeing with abortion in the following cases: rape, fetal malformation, or when the woman’s life is at risk. Many of these comments also specified that, in those cases when abortion is not criminalized, the government is responsible for ensuring that women have access to timely and safe abortion care.

One reader stated, “I am not at all against abortion if it has to do with rape, because it is so difficult, traumatizing, and uncomfortable bringing a baby into the world under those conditions.” Other readers with similarly qualified opinions commented,

I think abortion should be avoided because specifically it is the murder of a defenseless being, in addition to seriously damaging the woman who practices it. But I also believe that there are cases in which it is necessary and it is then that it is necessary to open a serious debate about the theme, which aims to establish the conditions that justify clearly when abortion can or should be practiced.

Permit abortion, but only in special cases: as a result of rape or when the baby is not healthy. And that is a decision of the parents, but abortion should not be the solution for the ‘unprotected heat of the moment.’

Responses of unknown opinion

The remaining responses expressed observations on the abortion debate or posed questions to the presidential candidates, without revealing a personal opinion on the matter. Below we describe the types of comments and themes that fell under the category of “unknown opinion.”

Questions for the candidates

The responses of unknown opinion included those commentaries that contained no clear opinion in favor of or opposition to abortion, but posed questions to the presidential candidates on the issue. Examples of such questions were, “How do you verify that it is the woman that is deciding to have the abortion and not her husband?” or “Independent of your personal opinion in favor of or opposed to abortion, who do you think has the right to make this decision [to have an abortion]?”

Other comments called upon the candidates to take clear public positions on the issue. For example, one reader said, “I would ask all the candidates to define themselves about abortion. That they state their clear posture and stick to it. I don’t want vague responses.” Another criticized candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador for not expressing his personal opinion on the issue, “How easy [he] tries to have it, simply saying ‘[I am in favor of] whatever the public says,’ like maybe he does not have [his own] opinion?”

Other general observations on the abortion debate

In addition, comments categorized as “unknown opinion” included those responses that made general observations about the abortion debate without expressing a clear opinion on the issue. The most common theme among these types of commentaries was that sex education was essential to preventing unwanted pregnancies: “Abortion is a situation that could be avoided if the population was given the basics – education and information, both for youth and adults, because sadly this problem is due to...the total lack of sex education.” Added another reader, *Abortion is the consequence, not the cause, and it should not be the problem. The problem in reality is education, the awful education that we have today. In primary, middle, and secondary school, they should say to girls, ‘If you are going to do it, make sure your partner uses a condom,’ like that, direct, without false prejudices or religious dogma.*

Some readers felt that abortion was not a priority issue, especially since they felt abortion was inevitable regardless of the legal context. Several expressed the idea that “there are more important things to deal with,” and one reader wrote, “With or without the law, abortion will still be practiced, so [this discussion] is irrelevant.” Many of these readers cited poverty, crime, and jobs as more critical election issues that the presidential candidates should address.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with findings by Stromer-Galley’s (2003) study of diversity of political conversation on the Internet, we found that the *El Universal online* forum on abortion appeared to attract a broad range of viewpoints and opinions. Readers who participated in this forum expressed highly informed opinions on abortion in Mexico and it was apparent that they were well aware of the nuances and complexities of the abortion debate both locally and internationally. Because the *El Universal online* website did not provide socio-demographic information on the participants in the forum, we are unable to describe the people whose opinions we analyzed here. Given the sophisticated nature of the responses posted in this *El Universal online* forum, however, it is likely that participants belonged to a similarly highly educated, arguably influential subpopulation. Furthermore, studies conducted in the United States and Korea have found a positive correlation between online participation and social and political participation (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Woo-Young, 2005).

Interestingly, despite the fact that the discussion question for the forum explicitly asked readers to pose questions to the presidential candidates about abortion, very few actually mentioned the candidates or asked questions. Rather, the vast majority took the opportunity to voice their own opinions on the issue and present arguments for and against abortion. Those who did mention specific candidates tended to call upon them to make their opinions known on the issue or, in the case of the candidacy of Felipe Calderón, the participants voiced their disapproval of the Catholic Church's perceived influence on his policymaking on abortion. We do not know for certain why so few forum participants posed questions to the candidates as instructed, but it is possible that the notion of engaging in political debate and discussion via media outlets is still novel in Mexico's fledgling democracy, particularly in an online newspaper forum. After all, it was only in the year 2000 that President Vicente Fox's election ended more than 70 years of authoritarian domination by the vanquished PRI, and until the 1990s most Mexican newspapers were viewed as little more than self-censored mouthpieces for the government (Hughes, 2006; Lawson, 2002).

Several noteworthy findings distinguish this study population from those of previous Mexican qualitative abortion opinion studies, one of which was the argument (voiced by pro-choice respondents) that abortion was a hallmark of modern society. In the three previous qualitative studies that we identified – two among rural midwives (Blanco-Muñoz & Castañeda, 1999; Castañeda, Billings, & Blanco, 2003) and one among urban Mexican youth (Tatum, Garcia, Yam, & Becker, 2006) – participants did not express awareness of abortion laws in other countries, and the notion of abortion legality as an indication of modernity was not mentioned. Because this analysis specifically targets participants with Internet access it is not surprising that their expressed perspectives relate directly to awareness of the abortion situation beyond their borders.

Interestingly, whereas pro-choice readers expressed condemnation of religion's involvement in the abortion debate and called for a secular debate as a hallmark of modern society, anti-abortion readers did not cite overtly religious reasons for opposing abortion. This finding contrasts with that of a previous Mexican qualitative study among rural midwives, which found that many described abortion as a sin, demonstrating how their Catholic faith played a large role in shaping their anti-abortion opinions (Blanco-Muñoz & Castañeda, 1999). Although we did find that most

anti-abortion comments in the *El Universal online* forum described pregnancy termination as ending a life, these participants did not cite religious beliefs to substantiate their claims. Despite the fact that 92% of the Mexican population is nominally Catholic (INEGI, 2000), religious arguments against abortion were not salient in this discussion forum. This finding supports Sjørup's (1997) assertion that, despite the Vatican's global reach and influence, at the local level its core teachings clash with local interpretations of Roman Catholicism: "The local imaginations of Catholicism, although they transform Catholic power, at the same time confirm the globalism of Catholicism, which is simply interpreted in much broader ways. However, this also places the hierarchical church on the sidelines as only one form of Catholicism among others" (Sjørup, 1997, p. 96). Mexican voters across parties consistently rank the Catholic Church highest when asked to describe their level of confidence in various institutions – higher than the Supreme Court, the National Human Rights Commission, or banks (Consulta Mitofsky, 2005) – but there appears to be a clear disparity between Mexicans' general respect for the institution of Catholicism and their agreement with the Church's views on, for example, contraception. The fact that 90% of Mexican abortions in the 1990s were among Catholic women is further evidence of this disparity, along with the fact that a recent study found that 70% of Mexican women agree that "it is possible to disagree with the Church on this matter and still be good Christians" (Kendrick, 2003).

A recurring theme throughout the forum – mentioned by readers on both sides of the abortion debate – was the complaint that sex education in Mexico is woefully inadequate and that greater awareness and use of contraception would prevent women from facing unwanted pregnancy and abortion in the first place. Whereas the anti-abortion comments tended to blame individuals for not educating and protecting themselves given the availability of so many contraceptive options, the pro-choice or neutral readers generally placed responsibility on the shoulders of parents or policymakers, whom they charged with ensuring that Mexican youth have access to adequate sex education. Those who were opposed to abortion were not necessarily opposed to artificial contraceptive methods, a striking deviation from the teachings of the Vatican.

Although pro-choice comments frequently cited woman-centered arguments defending her right to make a private decision about her body, both anti-abortion and pro-choice readers sometimes

supported their arguments with images and discourse about the future life of the unwanted child. In the case of pro-choice readers, they painted a bleak portrait of the child's future, often mentioning their destiny as street children or criminals; in essence, these comments implied that an abortion would save the child from unnecessary and inevitable suffering. On the other hand, anti-abortion comments took the approach of condemning abortion because it prevents the birth of someone who could potentially grow up to be a person of importance, talent, and influence. Neither child-centered perspective espouses ICPD values in terms of promoting the reproductive rights and individual autonomy of the woman and in some cases contained shades of neo-Malthusian justifications for supporting abortion rights (i.e., to alleviate poverty in future generations).

Although few participants in this online forum took advantage of the opportunity to pose questions they would ask the presidential candidates about abortion, the event did serve as an opportunity for select Mexican online newspaper readers to voice their opinions on the subject at a time when the social and political context was conducive to facilitating public discussion about this polemical issue in a unique online setting. After more than 70 years of severe abortion restrictions that had gone largely untouched until the late 1990s, this online forum took place at a time when various internal and external factors led to an astonishing legal reform that depenalized abortion for the first time in any Mexican municipality. The combination of organized international and domestic pro-choice movements, increasingly global strategizing and priority-setting among pro-choice actors, a newly free Mexican press, and the rise of Mexico's fledgling democracy that gave a voice to opposition parties all converged to set the stage for the national abortion debate that was reflected in this online forum.

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