

The Pill in the media

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Introduction

The subtitle 'celebrating choice' of this special issue of *Gynaecology Forum* highlights the most relevant aspect of the Pill as a method of contraception: it enables women not only to avoid unwanted pregnancies but also to choose when to start a family. There is no doubt that the media has played a major role in shaping women's views on the different contraceptives available. However, from the very start this effective method of contraception has had questions raised about its safety. The feeling that there was a kind of 'trade-off' between effectiveness and safety has always coloured any communication about the Pill.

Moral sensitivities were implied in the subtext of the very first Food and Drug Administration (FDA) press release issued on 9 May 1960, the day before approval was announced in *The New York Times* [1]. Commissioner J.L. Harvey stated: 'We had no choice as to the morality that might be involved. When the data convinced our experts that the drug meets the requirements of the new drug provisions our own ideas of morality had nothing to do with the case.' The text implies that issues of morality had been a factor in discussions on the medical appropriateness of a product such as the Pill beyond what would have been expected for any other product not related to sexual behaviour.

Over the last 50 years the media has played a key role in informing women about developments to do with the Pill, as well as about other contraceptive alternatives. The media has a dual role in shaping public opinion. On the one hand its agenda-setting role means that the media influences what a particular society considers important at a particular moment [2, 3]; conversely, what does not appear in the media has no social meaning and, consequently, does not receive much attention [4, 5]. On the other hand, the informing role of the media contributes to people's knowledge on any given issue. The media, like any other enterprise, including the health sector, is not neutral and we should therefore take the moral stance of the media owner into account when evaluating any news item appearing on a given topic. The Pill, and contraception in general, addresses issues that go beyond mere medical evidence. The same fact

can be communicated and perceived differently by any two people. At the same time we cannot ignore that the recipient (or her family) selects the media to which she has access and as a result there is a selection bias in the information she receives.

The concept of the media has changed dramatically since 1960. The printed press is no longer people's main source of information. Radio, television and the internet have sequentially occupied the position as the prime source of information [6]. However, the printed press influences the rest of the media and is the only one that can be fully historically researched. (Radio and television archives are more incomplete than the printed media, and the internet did not appear until long after 1960.) In this short paper we will therefore try to identify some of the most relevant ways in which the printed media has influenced society's perceptions and women's choices of hormonal contraception.

Material and methods

We searched medical, sociology and communication journals listed on PubMed and Web of Science. For the chronological analysis we used the databases of *The New York Times* and *La Vanguardia*, a Spanish newspaper from Barcelona. Both share the characteristics of having been published for more than a century and both offer an electronic library with a search system based on key words. However, each has a very different social, political and cultural background.

Both libraries were searched from January 1955 to April 2010 using the root terms 'contracep' for *The New York Times* and 'anticoncep' for *La Vanguardia*.

For the study on spontaneous coverage of positive news the electronic libraries of the most widely read newspapers and the MyNewsOnline database were searched in the same way.

Results

During the studied period, *The New York Times* published 2811 texts containing the selected root term, whereas *La Vanguardia* published only 1655.



Figure 1: Mentions of contraception issues in *The New York Times* and *La Vanguardia* from January 1955 to April 2010.

However, the distribution over time varied according to sociopolitical changes (Figure 1).

The New York Times

Before its approval by the FDA, the position of *The New York Times* was definitely favourable towards the Pill and reported on research progress ('Pills are tested in birth control', 10 July 1959). Once the Pill was on the social agenda, the journal reported in detail on the improvements as they became known, and during the 1960s the researchers in the field were treated as heroes of women's liberation ('The men who made a revolution', 10 April 1966). This trend changed progressively during the 1970s and the same reporter in the health section, Jane Brodie, clearly nuanced the tone of her articles ('These women are typical of those who have been disenchanting with the Pill', 23 March 1969; or 'The 17-year history of oral contraceptives has been marred by an intermittent stream of unsettling reports describing newly discovered health hazards associated with the Pill', 2 November 1977).

Analysis of the information appearing up to the present day reveals three main issues:

1. The challenges presented by the introduction of new or restyled contraceptive methods such as the intrauterine device or alternative delivery systems such as the patch or ring.
2. The references to the economic impact and the impact of the stock value of the companies involved in the contraceptive market.
3. The extent to which some of the misinformation spread about the Pill could hide commercial interests ('Fears, suits and regulations stall contracep-

tive advances', 27 December 1995). This opened the door to the 'Pill scare' era, to which we will return later.

La Vanguardia

Things in Spain evolved very differently. Under Franco's dictatorship the Pill did not exist for *La Vanguardia* until 1965. Any reference to experiences with the Pill in foreign countries was negative ('Discrepancies between scientists and experts have generated uneasiness in the country' [USA], 4 February 1970). However, even though it was not mainstream news the Pill did appear tangentially through films (*Prudence and the Pill* with Deborah Kerr) or in book reviews. As can be seen in Figure 1, *La Vanguardia's* line was consistent until Franco's death in 1975. However, with the political debate around decriminalization and the subsequent legalization of contraception the number of references rose to reach a similar level to that of *The New York Times*.

Pill scares: 'bad news' is news

A Pill scare can be defined as the reaction of ordinary people (or even medical practitioners outside the field) to sudden, muddled, decontextualized information on a hitherto unknown side effect of the Pill.

Even if it was perceived as being free of side effects when it was launched, the ability of the Pill's components to increase the risk of some diseases had been known since 1965 [7]. Case reports of isolated cases published in medical journals helped shape clinical practice.

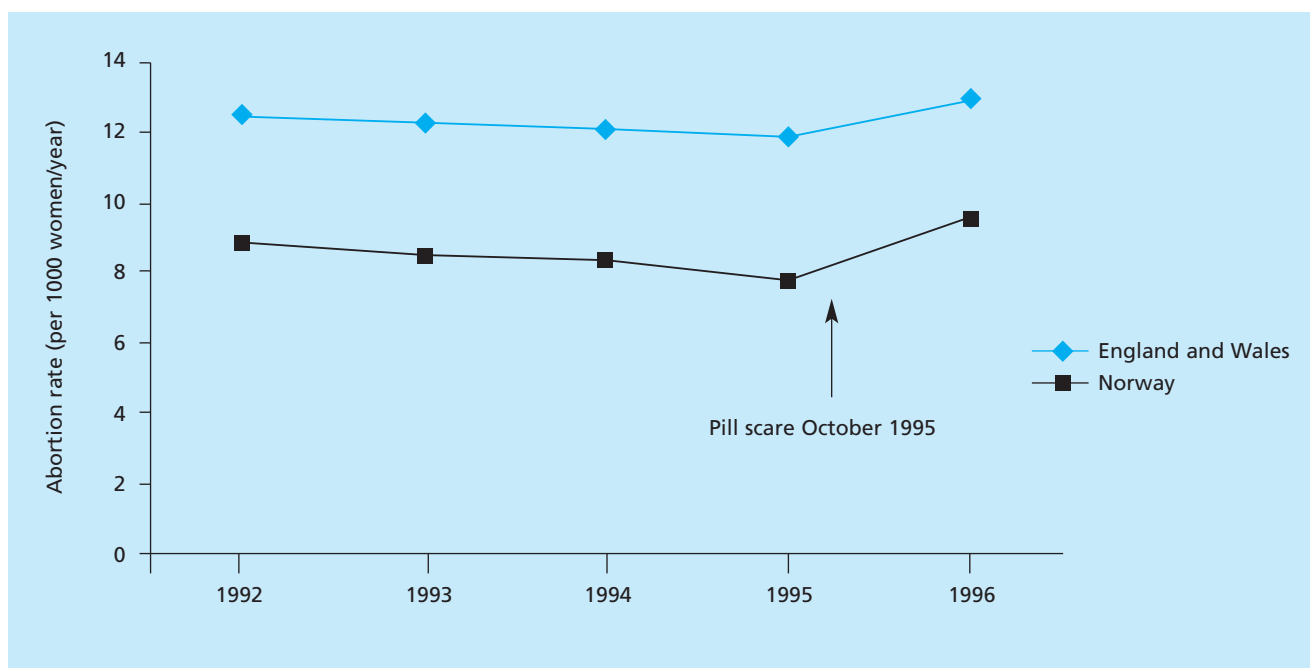


Figure 2: Impact of the 1995 Pill scare on the rate of induced abortion in England and Wales [11] and Norway [12].

As epidemiological studies were set up, more objective information but of uneven quality became available. The way in which the evidence was publicized caused varying reactions among users. There have been at least three well-identified Pill scares that caused women to stop taking it and, as a consequence, resulted in an increase in the number of unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

In 1983 two consecutive papers appearing in the same issue of *The Lancet* reported on the potential relationship between the use of some Pill brands and the incidence of breast and uterine cancer [8, 9]. The information reached the general media through a press release without prior warning to scientific societies or clinicians, who were taken by surprise by the flood of patients' calls. It was estimated that around 10% of all Pill users contacted their physician or family planning clinic for reassurance or to change their contraceptive method [10].

The editor of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* addressed this problem, stating, among other minor considerations, that 'It is also now time for the editors of medical journals to bind themselves to allowing the CSM [British Committee on Safety of Medicines] a reasonable minimum interval of time to consider and advise on papers on the safety of medicines before such papers are published and brought to the attention of the national press' — a concept that remains valid today.

The 1995 Pill scare was triggered by a warning issued by the CSM about third-generation oral contra-

ceptives with respect to venous thromboembolism. The warning resulted in 12% of users abandoning the Pill and an increase in induced abortions in comparison with previous years (Figure 2). When looking at these results in hindsight one of the senior authors of the paper concluded that there was no reason to justify such a fear and that 'anything that unjustifiably undermines credibility of any oral contraceptive is a serious threat to the public health, particularly in developing countries' [13].

In 2002, *The Lancet* was preparing to publish two papers on women who had tested positive for human papillomavirus (HPV): one on the risk of cervical cancer [14] and the other on the relation with parity. An early press release was issued to give the press the opportunity to contact the authors or other health advisers in order to formulate an independent opinion. However, the opportunity offered was not taken up and a cascade of inaccurate and alarmist messages appeared over the weekend. *Pulse*, the free UK newspaper for general practitioners, headlined: 'Pill doubles risk of cervical cancer'. The *Daily Mail* warned 'Long term Pill use may raise cervical cancer risks'. The *Evening Standard's* headline was 'Pill doubles cancer risk', and the BBC website's headline was 'Pill could boost cervical cancer risk'. No reference was made to the fact that this was restricted to women infected by HPV nor to the low absolute risk in cases progressing to invasive neoplasia if they were adequately followed up [15].

Is 'good news' news?

In April 2010 the *British Medical Journal* published a paper on mortality rates in a group of around 46,000 women who had been followed since 1968 until now by their general practitioners [16]. This study, the Royal College of General Practitioners' (RCOG) Oral Contraception Study, is ongoing and is one of the world's largest investigations into the health effects of contraceptive pills. The final conclusion was that the use of oral contraception was not associated with an increased long-term risk of death; indeed, there was a net benefit. Everyone would agree that this is good news for the hundreds of millions of past and present Pill users around the world [17].

However, a search of MyNewsOnline, a database focusing on the Spanish language general press, produced only four newspaper mentions of the RCOG study. Two, *El País* and *El Público*, could be considered progressive in their editorial orientation, whereas the other two, *La Razón* and *ABC*, are more conservatively oriented and tend to endorse the opinions of the Catholic Church. This lack of interest suggests that information on the Pill tends to be biased towards the selective publication of bad news and this results in a poor understanding of the benefits of oral contraceptive use by the general public.

Discussion

We have tried to give an overview of the relationship between the printed media and the Pill during its 50-year history. Due to size constraints it was necessary to restrict the scope of our article to a selected number of issues. The topic could be considered both more extensively and in greater depth.

Even in its present format our overview has a number of weaknesses that should be mentioned. For reasons already explained, reference is made only to the written media. We have concentrated on two established newspapers in Europe and the United States, neither of which may necessarily be considered representative of either the United States or Europe. They represent only partial information from the developed western world and ignore both the media in the developing world and in special and very interesting cases such as Japan.

However, we think that we are in a position to make some suggestions that would improve the quality of the information that the non-medical press offers its readers.

1. Training on the topic specifically tailored to journalists would improve the quality of their published work and assist their understanding of

related news, as a study performed in Spain illustrates [18].

2. Guidelines and good professional practice guidance [19, 20] would also improve the quality of communication on scientific topics. Journalists should strictly respect the concept of 'embargo', which is an agreement in which health and science journalists receive an article before publication to give them time to interview the researchers and other experts, and not use this privilege to scoop their peers.

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