Brrap Brrap Pew Pew: Representations of Abortion in Adult Animated Television Comedy

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BRRAP BRRAP PEW PEW: REPRESENTATIONS OF ABORTION

IN ADULT ANIMATED TELEVISION COMEDY

by

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A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Braap Brrap Pew Pew: Representations of Abortion in Adult Animated Comedy

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This thesis charges that representation of abortion in American adult animated comedy is under-examined and significant because representation on television in other genres has traditionally been absent or misleading. I also posit that greater truthful representation of abortion in popular culture may be effective in reducing prevalent abortion stigma in the U.S. amongst the young by normalizing the procedure in more accurately representing American attitudes towards abortion and how commonly the procedure is performed.

I review why our culture should be concerned about reducing abortion stigma in the U.S., the severity of which ranges from perpetuating silence around the procedure to violent acts. Though 76% of Americans say that they have not changed their stance on abortion in the past five years, in that same time period one-third of young Americans have changed their views, “and nearly three times as many have become more supportive of abortion rather than more opposed to abortion (25% v 9%).” (Davis, PhD, Cox, PhD and Griffin, PhD).

Abortion has long been considered a taboo topic on television and considered virtually absent until recently. However, there have been a number of references in adult animated comedies, which is particularly interesting given they are targeted to adults ages 18-34. I analyze
why and discuss the conditions that led to the sudden explosion in development of adult animated comedy and how the genre quickly became so popular.

I present research that has demonstrated the effectiveness of pop culture in communicating social norms and forcing viewers to reconcile their own prejudices. Elizabeth Levy Paluck’s research into prejudice reduction and social norms may apply to representations of abortion.

My research involved a comprehensive review of five programs—Archer (seasons 1-8), BoJack Horseman (seasons 1-3), Family Guy (seasons 1-15), Rick and Morty (seasons 1-2) and South Park (seasons 1-20). These were chosen to represent a variety of styles, networks and length of runs. I watched each episode and noted each mention or allusion to abortion. If there were more than one mention or allusion within one segment, I counted that as a single mention or allusion.

I discovered a total of 93 segments across the five programs that mentioned or alluded to abortion. Jokes were then analyzed for their accuracy, if they played to any negative stereotypes and if they were effective in normalizing the procedure.
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INTRODUCTION

There are many ways to mendaciously engage in an argument. One is by silencing your opponent. The anti-choice movement in the United States has chosen to advance their cause largely with this tactic. The very name that they began employing in the early 1970s, “pro-life,” is a propaganda term designed to disregard women’s bodily autonomy. Common tactics include manipulating internet search results with misinformation about abortion, getting the phone numbers of providers disconnected and web sites hacked and shut down, attempting to intimidate patients outside clinics and blocking access to healthcare, advocating for laws that limit access to abortion under the guise of “safety,” funding crisis pregnancy centers that lie about their credentials and patients’ reproductive health choices, and passing domestic and global gag rules that stipulate that providers literally can’t share information about healthcare without losing funding.

The anti-choice movement takes aim at all levels of our society: individuals, communities, businesses and government. As a result, abortion stigma is pervasive in American culture. Stigma is shame; it is isolating and prevents access to information and support. This level of stigma is incongruous with the realities surrounding abortion in the United States. The most recent statistics from researchers with the Guttmacher Institute, gathered in 2014, predict that 24% of American women will have an abortion by age 45. That year, 926,190 abortions were performed in the United States, and the abortion rate was 14.6 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 years (Jones, PhD and Jerman, MPH).

Moreover, the majority of Americans support abortion. When the Pew Research Center polled Americans in 2018, 58% said abortion should be legal in all or most cases (while 37% thought it should be illegal in all or most cases). The figures are more striking when broken
down by age and, significantly, education. 63% of those ages 18 to 29 said that abortion should be legal in at least most cases (57% of those older than age 65 agree). Only 35% of those under the age of 30 are opposed to abortion. 69% of those with a bachelor’s degree also said that abortion should be legal in at least most cases (the number jumps to 77% for those with a postgraduate degree). Of those who possess solely a high school education, 48% say abortion should be legal in at least most cases while 47% say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases (Hartig).

For individuals, abortion may be a moral issue. However, for our culture, abortion is a healthcare and gender equity issue. Too often, patients are impeded from accessing the abortion they need because of deceit about the procedure designed to maintain the patriarchy of specific religious, social, economic and political systems. Reproductive freedom is key to achieving other freedoms. A study of 813 women denied access to abortion found that they were more likely than those able to obtain wanted abortions to be in poverty, less likely to be employed full time and more likely to be on public assistance for 6 months afterwards. Even worse, they were more likely to experience these effects four years afterwards (Foster, PhD, Biggs, PhD and Ralph, PhD, MPH).

Sadly, this deceit is often communicated through mass media. A recent study of adolescents’ attitudes and influences used a method of polling designed to gather honest feedback—an anonymous Facebook survey that did not require parental consent for participation. In this survey, which ran from February to October 2012 and was conducted by researchers in the Departments of Obstetrics/Gynecology and Epidemiology at the University of Washington, English-speaking 13-29 year olds living in the United States were recruited to give their responses to measure their attitudes on sex and abortion. The final 996 surveys accepted for
analysis were deemed similar overall to the U.S. population. When asked the source of information for learning about abortion (respondents were allowed to select more than one), 68% of participants selected “media.” This was the leading source of information about abortion. Other sources trailed at 48% (didactics), 45% (friends) and 42% (parents). Further, when asked which of these information sources had “a lot of influence” on their abortion stance, media came in at 22%, second to parents, which was chosen by 30%. Notably, the finding that an individual’s leading source of information about abortion was the media, and that parents had the most information on their abortion stance, did not vary by an individual’s abortion stance (Altshuler, Gerns Storey and Prager).

If media is a leading source of information about abortion for at least 13-29 year olds, the producers of media are doing a disservice to our society in misrepresenting this topic. In the words of Carrie Nelson, a writer and co-founder of the organization Gender Across Borders:

Film and television is really critical in terms of influencing opinions on social and political issues. You look at a show like Will and Grace and how it really advanced the portrayal of gays and lesbians. In the same way, producers have the opportunity to shape the abortion debate with movies and shows that create a productive dialogue about the social and legislative issues that affect abortion. (Zara)

To me what these above statistics on youth and education indicate is the importance of breaking through filter bubbles and getting people accurate information to challenge misinformation about abortion. It also indicates to me that the incongruity between the prevalence of abortion stigma, the prevalence of abortion and the fact that 58% of Americans who believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases has led some to a misperception about social norms. As in, those facts
indicate abortion should not be taboo in our culture, and yet it is. Perhaps people mistakenly believe that our abortion rate is low and that there is low public support for abortion?

In 1980, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, a German political scientist, published *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin*, a theory of how people form their opinions based on their perceptions of public opinions. Media is integral to communicating these social norms and how people understand them. The basic idea is that a dominant point of view in a culture discourages individuals from voicing opinions that run counter to that point of view out of fear of being isolated. “Minority” opinions are then silenced, which then perpetuates this system. I have long been interested in media representation and the significance of the absence of representation, misrepresentation and so on. On a positive note, I think we can also all point to an occasion of really positive representation that made us feel visible and connected, inspired or otherwise impacted us in a helpful way. Given Americans now spend nearly six hours per weekday watching TV (The Nielsen Company), Noelle-Neumann’s theory is especially relevant for modern times. I believe that the spiral of silence can explain a lot about the misperception of social norms around abortion. The anti-choice strategy of silencing the opposition has been effective in shaping the media.

On any given evening, you or I can turn on the television and catch a program featuring a woman being murdered as a part of the plotline. This is especially prevalent on the bonanza of crime fiction and true crime shows pervasive on network TV and basic cable. At the same time, I would challenge you to find a show, drama or comedy, where a character is discussing or choosing abortion. Though in the past year or two this representation has become more common, these incidences nowhere near reflect American abortion rates. We are highly likely to know
someone in our lives who has had an abortion, more so than we are to know someone who has been the victim of homicide.

I started paying closer attention to this in the course of volunteer work with The Doula Project, a non-profit that provides free and sliding scale full spectrum doula care for those who are low-income and those who lack existing support structures. The Doula Project doulas provide support for pregnant people undergoing abortion procedures. The job includes waiting with patients in the procedure room while they change into their gown, and making conversation to help them feel at ease while they wait for their provider. A common question we will ask patients is how they are feeling and a common response is that they are anxious about what they will feel physically during the procedure. One morning, a patient continued saying that they had spent the night before on YouTube trying to find videos about abortion, because “you never see this on TV.” (Since that time, several patients have made similar comments.)

We laughed together about how scary it could be to google or YouTube “abortion,” because there is a great deal of misinformation purposefully circulating. I agreed with her that it’s rare to find abortion storylines on television, but mentioned that a movie, a comedy, had recently been released where the main character chooses abortion (Obvious Child, 2014) and she was intrigued.

Our conversation stayed with me and I began to subconsciously take note each time an abortion featured in a television plotline or script. I still do. Mostly this happened on dramas; Shonda Rhimes was a pioneer, deliberately making space for this (and fighting network censors). Rhimes is a writer and producer who has won 16 Emmys, and who is best known for her work developing the television shows Grey’s Anatomy (2005) and Scandal (2012), Each time an abortion plotline featured on a program, there were national news stories because it was so rare,
and also, people were so glad to see these stories being told that it was a big deal. Along the way, I also noticed some subtler abortion references—on comedies.

Each December I enjoy re-watching special Christmas episodes of television shows to get in the holiday spirit. A few years ago, I was settling in to view *South Park*’s “Woodland Critter Christmas” (season 8, episode 13). I had seen it a number of times before, but had forgotten that there were an abundance of unabashed mentions of abortion and a (reasonably) accurate representation of the procedure. Looking back, it probably didn’t jump out at me on my first viewing for many reasons. *South Park* is a cartoon, so the outrageous is more mundane than it would be were it live action. We also expect smart shows like this to be edgy and push boundaries. Yet at the same time, abortion jokes feel authentic, because they’re dealing with a part of life and in life we joke around. Plus, comedy works best when it’s exploring power and taboo, working to release tension.

I began to recall other instances of abortion humor in adult animated comedy and was not only curious as to why this was not more openly acknowledged, but I wanted to know how prevalent this really was. I discovered even the charming family comedy *Bob’s Burgers* contained a reference (“Torpedo”). I became curious to explore the deeper meaning of these references in American culture and whether they were as important as I suspected.

Scholars Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport at the University of California at San Francisco have also researched the representation of abortion in American television (as well as American film), but while they have done extensive analysis of these depictions in the genres of drama, horror, comedy and science fiction, they have captured only very recent significant adult animated comedy episodes where abortion was a major part of the storyline, categorizing these broadly under the comedy genre.
Part of animated comedy’s ability to utilize abortion humor under the radar is that abortion is rarely the storyline. Much like in everyday life, it’s a comment on a person or situation, grounded in the situation. In many ways, it is more realistic than “very special episodes,” where abortion is used as a plot device to create drama. As Sisson and others have found, often those episodes contain misinformation.

My research method differs significantly from other scholars researching these representations. Sisson and Kimport, for example, utilized IMBD and other search tools such as Wikipedia, using keywords like “abortion” to filter and find episodes with abortion content. I approached this differently, knowing that tool would not be as effective for my purposes. Some tools, such as official transcripts of early seasons of South Park scripts, are available online and are searchable, but are incomplete for my purposes. After all, not all abortion humor directly uses the word “abortion.” Adult animated comedy is known for being clever, incorporating wordplay and visual jokes as well. I was already familiar with the genre and chose five series that I knew had daring, witty content and were likely to include at least one instance of abortion humor. I chose to watch each episode (via a combination of iTunes’s season pass, Hulu and Netflix) and note each incidence of humor relating to abortion, recording this in a google doc.

The title of my thesis, “Brrap Brrap Pew Pew” is taken from a groundbreaking episode of BoJack Horseman (season 3, episode 6), in which Diane, the social media manager for teen music sensation Sextina Awkwafina, accidentally tweets from Sextina’s account “I’m having an abortion” (to 40 million followers) while speaking those same words to BoJack. Sextina pretends to have an abortion, after filming a radical music video inspired by her decision and her choice to feel no shame, while Diane actually has one and has to face all of the barriers put in place designed to make her feel isolated and embarrassed. Later, Sextina discovers she’s actually
pregnant and decides to keep the baby. This episode is part of a trend between both live action television and animated comedy demonstrating a notable uptick in the number of accurate and unapologetic depictions of abortion on screen as part of the plotline.

There are a number of factors behind this, most significantly an increase in diversity of creative teams, notably with more female writers. As you may have guessed, female writers were responsible for both “Woodland Critter Christmas” and “Brrap Brrap Pew Pew.” Another factor is a broader array of viewing platforms—BoJack Horseman is a Netflix original. In the first chapter, I review the history of moral censorship of American television programs and how that affected anything related to sex (including depictions of pregnancy). I also briefly discuss the major content influencers from writers to network heads to pressure groups and more. My aim is to help explain why abortion is one of the last taboos on television.

In Chapter 2, I discuss how animation became a dominant force in the U.S. and why it and its viewers should be taken seriously. The road began in 1987 with FCC deregulation and the creation of Fox, which gave us The Simpsons and heralded the rebirth of adult animated comedy. It also brought more channels and viewing platforms, which allowed for more creative freedoms and content.

I expand on the destructive power of stigma, specifically abortion stigma, in Chapter 3, and why it is so vital that this be taken seriously. I also explore the allure of the taboo.

In Chapter 4 I aim to demonstrate that previous television shows have been influential in changing perceptions of social norms via representation of a previously unrepresented social group. I also review Elizabeth Levy Paluck’s research on changing behavior in response to perceptions of social norms using the Rwandan radio program Musekeweya. I became interested in Paluck’s research because of the potential parallel between her findings and individuals who
hold the view that they would not choose abortion for themselves, but they wouldn’t stop someone else from accessing it.

I put forth that no representation is insignificant (including abortion humor). Representation of abortion communicates social norms. Though 76% of Americans say that they have not changed their stance on abortion in the past five years, in that same time period one-third of young Americans have changed their views, “and nearly three times as many have become more supportive of abortion rather than more opposed to abortion (Davis, PhD, Cox, PhD and Griffin, PhD).” It’s very interesting that these abortion references in adult animated comedy are within programs designed to attract an 18-34 key demographic.

Very briefly, I review some of the live action depictions of abortion on television, as well as other research that has been conducted on the representation of abortion (including problematic representation of abortion) in Chapter 5. I then discuss my research methods and how I analyzed each joke.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I take a closer look at incidences of abortion humor in adult animated comedy: Archer (5 incidences), BoJack Horseman (15 incidences), Family Guy (38 incidences), Rick and Morty (4 incidences) and South Park (31 incidences). The full database can be viewed here: goo.gl/TvdYGa.

The landscape has changed so much since 2014 when I began sketching out this thesis. I’m grateful that more stories are being told, though there is clearly far to go, not just in how abortion is depicted, but more broadly in the way pregnancy is depicted.

The statistics I quote above refer to women, but it’s important to note that not all people who choose abortion identify as women. I reached out to the Guttmacher Institute on March 4, 2018 to inquire if they had any research on the gender of patients who seek abortion care, as I
hoped to include that info here for the sake of accuracy. Senior Communications Assistant Melissa A. Martin replied on April 4 to tell me that “To the best of our knowledge, these data do not yet exist. We are planning on including questions about gender identity on our next survey of abortion patients, but as those data will be for 2020, they will unfortunately not be available in time for your thesis” (Martin). My solution, to be mindful of this in the rest of this paper, is to refer to people who seek abortion as patients or pregnant people whenever possible (instead of women), unless quoting research or figures that directly refer to women. What’s a bit tricky, though, is that there is misogyny inherent in abortion stigma. As I will discuss, part of that comes from defying expectations of what it means to be a woman. As I navigate that, please know that I am aware that those who do not identify as women who choose abortion are affected by stigma in ways I may not address.
HISTORY OF TELEVISION CENSORSHIP AND THE ABORTION TABOO

In November 1975, the Writers Guild of America, along with established television writers like Norman Lear and Allan Burns, filed a lawsuit against the FCC in federal court in protest of a new restrictions on program content that would air between 7-9 pm. “Family Viewing Hour” was put in place by the three broadcast networks (ABC, NBC and CBS), but the lawsuit alleged that the FCC had improperly used its influence to pressure the networks to adopt this restrictive policy. The writers won. Writers Guild of America President David W. Rintels wrote an Op-Ed for The New York Times following the victory explaining the decision to challenge the FCC and networks in court. Titled ‘Why We Fought The Family Viewing Hour,’ he explains the chokehold network censorship was having on progressive issues, and how much of the FCC and network’s campaign against “sex” on television was not what it appeared.

Sex on television means, to a large extent, talk. Talk about homosexuality, talk about abortion, talk about birth control and prostitution and pre-marital or extra-marital relationships. It means, essentially, a whole vast area of important human concern. Some people don’t like to hear or talk about any of those subjects; they are made uncomfortable by them. I would say to those people, I think you should be willing to hear and talk about all human concerns—but if you are not willing, turn the set off. (Rintels)

The Family Viewing Hour was not the first attempt at network censorship, particularly around ‘moral issues’ like sex. From its very beginnings there were always rules designed to make sure plots, characters and even advertisements conformed to set standards of morality.

Sex has traditionally been censored in television, often in not-so-obvious ways, as put so well by Rintels. A classic example involved beloved icon Lucille Ball. She wrote her pregnancy into her sitcom I Love Lucy in 1952, but was forbidden from using the word “pregnant” because
it was considered vulgar (of course executives were likely also skittish about an expecting interracial couple in a time before *Loving v. Virginia*, 1972). On Valerie Harper’s show *Rhoda* (1974-1978), the lead character got married in the first season and Standards & Practices still demanded that when Rhoda and her husband were depicted in bed together, the husband had to have a pajama top on. Carl Reiner was frustrated with censorship of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, when writers were prohibited from using the word “pregnant” and scripting dialogue that instructed a child, “You come from Mama’s belly.” Reiner argued “If [parents] want to go back and say, ‘No, that’s not true, you come from a cabbage,’ they have their option. But at least the truth is out, and that’s what we should be doing. Telling people the truth!” (Neuwirth 17)

One might ask who was motivated to maintain these taboos on sex (and abortion) on television and why? The answer is complex, but essentially came down to maintaining social mores and was determined by the men in power. Few women were represented in creative and executive capacities behind the camera or at regulatory agencies, and networks didn’t want to upset advertisers or the FCC for fear of losing revenues or their broadcast licenses. There were also major pressure groups, like the National Catholic Office for Radio and Television, which formed as a result of the second Vatican Council (and was the sister group to the powerful Legion of Decency, which policed film), and threatened economic boycott, organized protest and lobbying of censors against any film that they deemed obscene. Coincidentally, with the rise of McCarthyism, Standards & Practices also grew in power.

**The Mechanics of Network Censorship**

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is legally prohibited from censorship. It is still a formidable agency whose might derives mainly from its ability to levy heavy fines. For
decades, the FCC and network heads collaborated to avoid threatened Congressional regulation. Network heads were motivated by a desire to maintain their autonomy and minimize regulations on their advertising sales, an important source of revenue and production funding. They also needed to maintain relationships with conservative affiliates throughout the country and assure that they did not reject programming (which sometimes happened anyway). To achieve these ends, they engaged in self-policing and censored their own programming based on the moral and political codes of the day, both written and unwritten.

The Communications Act of 1934 established the FCC, giving it authority over interstate radio, television, wire, satellite and cable communications. It was endowed with the power to grant, deny and renew licenses. These licenses were so valuable that this was a weighty incentive for broadcasters to self-police.

The National Association of Broadcasters is an organization founded in 1923 for radio broadcasters. The NAB developed a voluntary code of acceptable moral content for its members. It was passed down to television networks as guidance for crafting programming. In 1952, this informal code got teeth. In part to restore trust after the quiz show scandals of the 1950s, and in part because the FCC’s content guidelines were so vague and the potential consequences for violating them so severe (loss of your broadcast license), the Association created the NAB Television Code of 1952. This became the first of many industry initiatives to self-police. Networks needed to maintain control over not just their programming but over their increasingly lucrative advertising (at the time, advertisers still sponsored entire television shows, underwriting the costs of production).

The NAB code included directives steeped in morality (Television Board of National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters). Regarding sex and sexuality, the code
specified that “Respect is maintained for the sanctity of marriage and the value of the home. Divorce is not treated casually nor justified as a solution for marital problems” as well as “Illicit sex relations are not treated as commendable” and “Sex crimes and abnormalities are generally unacceptable as program material” (recognizing today that homosexuality would likely fall under that category). There are references to sexual sin, as in “The use of locations closely associated with sexual life or with sexual sin must be governed by good taste and delicacy.” There were all fairly vague, but definitely prescribed particular behavior on television.

Certainly, another factor motivating network censorship was and continues to be protecting the network brand. Though that is tied quite closely to their interest in protecting their profits. It’s not surprising that NAB members resisted giving up their autonomy when it came to placating advertisers, given that’s how networks make their money, especially back in an age before syndication, international sales and DVD and merchandising sales.

Government pressure came to a head with the “Family Viewing Hour.” The concept for this solution was suggested by the FCC chairman himself, Richard Wiley, who began lobbying the networks to adopt it in November 1974 (a fact that later left the FCC open to charges of censorship in California federal district court). At the time there were only three networks- CBS, NBC and ABC. CBS took the concept from Wiley and developed it into the form of the “Family Viewing Hour,” a 7-9 pm block of programming in which only tasteful, family-friendly content would run. It also called for spoken and visual audience content “advisories,” to alert viewers to inappropriate or potentially disturbing content.

The name Family Viewing Hour may seem confusing, given that it refers to two hours of programming content, but that is because the programming from 7-8 pm would be on local stations and the hour from 8-9 pm would be filled with network programming. One of the
reasons creative teams were so frustrated with it was because this time block was implemented inconsistently across the United States due to time zone differences, causing further chaos and impacting more programs. There were also no clearly defined rules as to what would be acceptable to air during these two hours; broadly, networks had agreed to air only programs deemed appropriate for viewing by a general family audience. The precise meaning of this was open to interpretation and caused a lot of chaos and frustration as writers struggled to guess what would get through network standards and practices. The uncertainty and clashes with censors forced many writers to take fewer risks, just at a time when programming had been growing bolder. James Brooks (co-creator of The Mary Tyler Moore Show) admitted that concerns over network censorship impacted decisions about dialogue on his shows. “Brooks confessed in a New York Times piece at the time, “It scares me that we have been intimidated like that,” he said, “I’m ashamed to admit it, but [we have]”” (Armstrong 231).

Norman Lear would not accept this. He, along with the Writers Guild of America and other well-established writers such as Allan Burns filed a federal lawsuit in November 1975 in federal court. The United States District Court for the Central District of California ruled that, among other violations,

the FCC committed a per se violation of the First Amendment by exerting improper pressure on the networks” and “the networks and the NAB violated the First Amendment by “fail(ing) to exercise independent program judgments and instead becom(ing) surrogates in the enforcement of government policy” and by agreeing to compromise the independent programming judgments of individual broadcast licensees. (Writers Guild of America, West, Inc., et al. v. American Broadcasting Co., Inc.)
Why not just turn the television set off? The Family Viewing Hour became a way to sell televisions and a way to have family time, encouraging families to watch programs together. Nowadays, as competition for increasingly fragmented audiences is fiercer than ever, and advertising dollars are tied to viewership, it’s hard to imagine a network telling viewers (real or purported), “just don’t watch.”

As I mentioned earlier, this call for increased censorship came just as programming was becoming bolder. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw an increase in public activism, and on screen there were exciting new shows, not without controversy, like The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In, All in the Family, and The Mary Tyler Moore Show. In 1972, Maude (created by Norman Lear) made history by showing a main character choosing abortion when faced when an unplanned pregnancy. But there was also blowback and shows were affected by shifting cultural tides and a sea change in Washington. While the FCC was applying increased pressure on networks to censor violence and anything in the realm of ‘sex,’ they were buoyed by outside pressure groups who exploited the system that enabled the public to file content complaints with the FCC. In 1972, the FCC received 2,000 such complaints about inappropriate content. Just two years later, that number had risen to 25,000 (Armstrong 229-230). There was a clear pushback to the representation of strong, independent women in the media and the rise of feminism, as well as gains in women’s rights, particularly the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973 that made abortion legal as a matter of federal, not state, law, and the push for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. As Jennifer Armstrong observed:

[There was] a sudden increase in scrutiny of sex on network television, even on the groundbreaking shows that were enjoying great artistic freedoms…Times were changing. Antifeminist crusader Phyllis Schlafly now had a regular commentary spot on the CBS
Morning News. The Equal Rights Amendment no longer seemed like a sure thing. Single women facing relevant, realistic issues were on their way out. And surely no proper lady talked openly about sex. (219)

The subjects that Rintels calls attention to in his New York Times Op-Ed were wrapped up in stigma. The legalization of abortion only emboldened anti-choice activists, who utilized misogynist language and spread falsehoods about the procedure. The “talk” Rintels appeals for would have been more useful than ever, but to networks still headed by men with conservative principles, there was no place for it.

In the 1970s, most households could access just three networks. HBO was founded in 1972, and was available nationwide in 1975. Yet it wasn’t until the early 1980s that the cable landscape began to really develop, both because households gained access to cable and networks began to proliferate. Cable networks are not subject to FCC regulations because the FCC only has jurisdiction over public airwaves; cable is a private paid subscription network. Cable networks had more freedom but were also more diverse and adventurous in their programming. They are more loyal to their brand identity and audiences because they are not beholden to advertisers. It wasn’t until 1975 that a network hired a female vice president of programming. Lin Bolen was promoted to this position at NBC in September, but left less than a year later (though in that time she succeeded in taking NBC to first place in the national Nielsen ratings). It may not surprise you that the first female network CEO presided over the cable network that she founded. Kay Koplovitz is the sports programming visionary who created the USA network in 1977.

In 1988, due to network budget cuts and increasing competition brought about by deregulation, NBC and CBS eliminated their Standards & Practices departments and ABC
slashed the budget and staff of theirs. Other departments were given charge of enforcing content standards. The same year, the NAB TV code authority disbanded. The era of self-regulation had come to a close.

The present situation is not yet ideal in terms of representation for women in the entertainment industry. If women were to achieve gender parity in these positions, it is likely that they would be better able to advocate for strong and non-sexualized female characters, and plotlines that contain issues of concern to women, including representations of abortion.

The present situation is not yet ideal in terms of representation for women in the entertainment industry. If women were to achieve gender parity in these positions, it is likely that they would be better able to advocate for strong and non-sexualized female characters, and plotlines that contain issues of concern to women, including representations of abortion.

The Bunche Center at the UCLA Institute for American Cultures regularly studies diversity in the entertainment industry. Their 2015 report indicates that women are underrepresented by a factor of nearly 2 to 1 among creators of broadcast scripted shows, and the overall share of female writers for these shows in 2012-13 was 32%. Women are even less represented in management. 71% of television network and studio heads are male; 73% of television senior management is male; and 55% of television unit heads are male (Hunt and Ramon 2). In the spring of 2014, the ACLU filed complaints with the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing and the Labor Department’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, alleging “overt sex stereotyping and implicit bias” in studios, networks and talent agencies. “The organization also collected stories from 50 female directors whose agents had been told by producers to ‘not send women’ for prospective jobs or who were personally told ‘we already hired a woman this season’ when vying for television gigs” (Khatchatourian). Men such as Norman Lear (Maude) and Matt Weiner (Mad Men) have been valuable allies in advancing positive portrayals of women and abortion. Others, such as Greg Berlanti (Everwood) have fumbled the ball. It is women like Joanna Johnson (The Fosters),
Shonda Rhimes (Gray’s Anatomy) and Lena Dunham (Girls) who have been praised for penning episodes where abortion was discussed openly and without stigma.

A recent and exciting development is that social media has an influence on conversations around both programming and content. Audiences can interact and produce feedback in the forms of emails, tweets, Facebook posts and other chatter to indicate their support or frustration with a show. Audiences and pressure groups have more power than ever now that social media has given them a connection to influencers, likeminded fans, creatives, critics and advertisers.

**REAGAN’S FCC AND THE BIRTH OF FOX**

Ironically, if cartoon fart jokes about aliens, butts and Shoney’s make you giggle you can thank President Ronald Reagan. One of the principles of “Reaganomics” was deregulation of domestic markets. Reagan appointed Mark Fowler Chairman of the FCC under his administration, and he began serving May 18, 1981. Fowler immediately set upon a marketplace approach to the agency’s regulation of licenses, which drastically changed the landscape of American television and was a reinterpretation of the agency’s mission. Under past FCC chairs, the direction was to guard the public trust. Under Fowler, the FCC was profit-driven, less about guarding licenses than selling them. In order to maximize profits and appease those buying licenses, multiple long-standing rules were changed, including the F.C.C.’s cable anti-trafficking regulation, dropping the Fairness Doctrine, and weakening advertising standards.

With the pressure of the federal government monitoring content replaced by increased pressure to turn a profit and never-before-seen competition, Standards & Practices lost their clout. The NAB Code was abandoned in January 1983; it had served its purpose to fend off government regulation that was no longer a threat and was no longer necessary. By 1988, NBC
and CBS had eliminated their S&P departments entirely and ABC had seriously reduced the staff, saving money. Not that there were no curtails for writers’ rooms; that responsibility was shifted to other departments. In some sense this was not positive, because other departments did not necessarily have relevant experience or relationships to give valuable input.

The added competition that CBS, NBC and ABC were bracing themselves against included 59 new cable networks that were introduced between 1980 and 1990. And on October 9, 1986, FOX became the fourth network. FOX was facing the same challenges as the other networks and needed a bold strategy to distinguish their programming and attract audiences and advertisers. Their original programming was bold and a little edgy—*The Late Show with Joan Rivers, Married…with Children, The Tracey Ullman Show*. *The Simpsons* started as short sketches airing during *The Tracey Ullman Show* (executive produced by James L. Brooks), which had premiered on FOX on April 5, 1987. The animated shorts began airing two weeks later and became very popular. The response encouraged creator Matt Groening to pitch FOX execs on the idea of a full half hour show of his own starring the family. This was radical, because there had not been animation on primetime since *The Flintstones* had ended its six-year run in 1966. Groening would become convinced, though, that the reason *The Simpsons* deal came through was because those execs were of the right age to recall watching *The Flintstones* in primetime and could imagine a successful adult animated comedy in that timeslot (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 78).

**The Simpsons and Their Descendants**

*The Simpsons* was also edgy because this fourth network had to take risks to survive. They precision-targeted 18 to 49-year-old viewers with their original programming. President of
FOX broadcasting, Jamie Kellner, stated their strategy: “If it would work on one of the other networks, we don’t want it” (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 82). The show premiered in its new format on December 17, 1989 and has gone on to become the longest-running American sitcom, with 649 episodes as of the end of 2018. Not only did FOX have a hit show, but they gained a template for replicating their success. As Wendy Hilton-Morrow and David T. McMahan recap:

On January 14, 1990, *The Simpsons* began airing on Sunday nights. Within just two months of its premiere, the animated program jumped into the Nielsen’s top 15. The success came in spite of FOX’s broadcast coverage reaching only four out of five homes in America…by its second season, *The Simpsons* became FOX’s top-rated series, and any fears that advertisers would stay away from prime time animation were alleviated as *The Simpsons* commanded $300,000 from national advertisers for a thirty-second spot.

It didn’t hurt that animation was less expensive than live action either, at roughly half the cost. Where in the early 1990s each half hour episode of an animated show could cost anywhere from $250,000-$600,000 to produce, the fee for a live-action drama or comedy topped $1 million (Larson 56). Other networks caught on, and very quickly television entered an age of adult animated comedy that has only continued to blossom. That’s not to say that there weren’t hiccups along the way. In their haste to replicate a winning formula, FOX, CBS and ABC all had a hard time finding a great show like *The Simpsons*. FOX tried (and failed) with *The Critic* (1994-1995), ABC experimented with *Capitol Critters* (1992), and CBS tried *Fish Police* (1992) and *Family Dog* (1993). FOX would eventually hit its stride with an animation block anchored by *The Simpsons* and featuring shows like *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), *Futurama* (1999-2013) and *Family Guy* (1999-present), among many others.
Cable networks were having a much better time developing animated programming, recognizing all the potential of the art form and the appeal to advertisers in attracting coveted age groups that animation appealed to.

Cable as a medium had also developed to a point where it was finally saturating American households and overcoming restrictions that made it easier to operate. Cable franchises in the largest cities were granted in the late 1970s/early 1980s, and by 1985, nearly half of all U.S. households (41.5 million out of 86.79 million total (Statista)) were wired for cable. At the same time, by 1986, two million (mostly non-cabled and rural) households owned satellite dishes (The Cable Center).

Nickelodeon was launched in 1979 but only began airing its own original animated programming, NickToons, in the summer of 1991. Produced by creative consultant Vanessa Coffey, the result was cartoon classics Doug, Rugrats and The Ren and Stimpy Show, which kicked off a string of other hits the network is now known for. MTV, as Nickelodeon and MTV shared a parent company, would also air episodes of The Ren and Stimpy Show, since it had a lot of crossover appeal for its young audiences. Comedy Central is a part of Viacom as well, and was launched in 1991. In 1993, MTV got into original animation with Beavis and Butthead, which was very successful, and squarely aimed at 18-34 year olds. Comedy Central got into the animated comedy game in 1995 with Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist, which aired for 7 years (it would score a major, network-transforming hit in 1997 with South Park). In 1992, the Cartoon Network launched as a basic cable channel, dedicated to animation. It aired cartoons from their substantial library of Hanna-Barbera, MGM and Warner Brothers animated classics. Also, in 1994 it began airing a clever original program called Space Ghost Coast to Coast, a modern, satiric spin on the old cartoon Space Ghost for adults in the form of an animated talk show. This
show would eventually get a number of spin-offs that would help Cartoon Network build its brand with young adults. 6 years later (September 2, 2001), Cartoon Network would launch Adult Swim, which is a 10-hour evening/overnight block of programming dedicated to adult animated comedy, featuring a great deal of original (acclaimed) programming.

One of the keys to cable’s success was that many of these shows had a lot of cross-demographic appeal. Parents and children could both find something to like about *Spongebob Squarepants, Daria, Powerpuff Girls* and other original shows. And as children grew, they could continue to enjoy these programs (or graduate to edgier, more sophisticated animated fare and not feel as there were any distinction between that and live action programming). Also importantly, given the time frame, this seeded the audience that would form a huge fan base for today’s big hits, creating a culture that values adult animated comedy.

Adult animated comedy hit its stride in the late 1990s in a second wave of creative output that includes many series still on the air today (I would consider the failed mass attempt to replicate *The Simpsons* in the early 1990s the first wave). *South Park* was a part of this wave; it premiered in 1997. *Family Guy* debuted in 1999. It’s interesting that this coincides with what critics have deemed the golden age of television, which is typically a definition reserved for well-made dramas. There has been an incredible rich output of smart, critically acclaimed animated comedies in the past 20 years that are well-written, well-voiced and well-directed, that deal with serious topics with humor. One of the hallmarks of many of the most successful adult animated comedies is their willingness to broach taboo subjects, indicating audiences are eager for these topics to be explored. These shows are also re-watchable, packed with jokes and cultural references that can be appreciated more fully the second time around. It’s very interesting culturally that American animated comedies have very long runs, and according to
IMDb.com, 4 out of the 10 longest-running American television shows (including 3 of the top 4 slots) are animated comedies. Of the programs that I will be discussing, *Archer* (not on the longest-running list) is contracted to be on the air through its 10th season and *Rick and Morty* creators just signed a deal to keep it on the air for a total of 10 seasons (seven seasons more). *South Park* has an agreement with Comedy Central to be on the air through its 23rd season (it completed its 22nd in December 2018).

**Unique Characteristics of Adult Animated Comedy**

In a May 2015 interview with The Young Turks to promote his autobiography, Norman Lear spoke about his experience with network censors and gave this response when asked if a show like *All in the Family* could be on the air today (The Young Turks).

**NORMAN LEAR.** People who are showrunners, who are currently involved in television, tell me they agree with you. They don’t think it could be on today.

I’m not in the business, so I don’t know, but that’s what I hear. It’s hard for me to believe, because I think if— anyway, I do see things that are, you know, I mean *South Park* is, you know, strongly political.

**CENK UYGUR.** That’s true. And I think that’s one difference between cable and network, and maybe the networks are still a little bit more skittish.

**LEAR.** Well, yeah, I guess you can do a little more with animation anyway. They don’t seem like real characters. But they’re very real if you’re paying attention. One of the defining characteristics of animation is, as Lear says, that you can do more with in, in a sense because they don’t seem like real characters. James Snead calls this animation’s “rhetoric of harmlessness,” with animation “regarded as culturally marginal enough to exist only in the
world of innocuous fantasy, not “real-life” effects” (Mittell 43). With subjects one step removed from reality, they become less threatening and thus it becomes easier to tackle difficult subjects.

There’s an inherent playfulness and innocence to the form, as well as plasticity. The effect is that it enhances the comedy. In classic cartoons, this was exploited with talking animals, outrageous slapstick and defying laws of gravity and physics, as elucidated in “The Laws of Cartoon Motion” by Mark O’Donnell (McKinney). Devices like time machines and personal spaceships don’t strain credulity because they aren’t tied to the rules of our universe. In the animated world, men can get pregnant (as has been explored in Family Guy and South Park gags; spoiler alert—they don’t like it), unleashing new possibilities for how pregnancy is addressed. Speaking truth to power and mildly obscene content is less disarming when it comes from unexpected sources who lack power in real life, such a talking dog and baby (Family Guy), fourth grade boys (South Park) or an overweight female office drone (Archer). The fact that typically animated comedies are drawn in bright colors (associated with the juvenile) makes the contrast between that and their edgy content even more subversive and amusing. In a way, it lets creators and networks get away with more.

Many of the things that adult animated comedies script are inherently more forgivable because everything can always go back to normal the following episode with no consequences. South Park commented on this in the episode “Mysterion Rises” (season 14, episode 12) when Kenny McCormick (the character who was killed off in nearly every episode in seasons 1-5) acknowledges that he is upset that his friends never acknowledge his death. In the following episode, “Coon vs. Coon & Friends,” he lets them have it. They’re playing superheroes and discussing their superpowers. Stan (as “Toolshed”) asks “And Mysterion can…wait? What’s your
power, Mysterion?” “I can’t die,” he replies, gruffly. “Oh, yeah, good one,” Stan cheers.

“Mysterion can’t die. And Iron Maiden is indestructible—”

KENNY. No, Stan. I’m being serious. I really, really can’t die.

STAN. What?

KENNY. Like last night in the alley. The cult leader stabbed me and I bled all over the place. And you screamed ‘Oh, my god.’ And you called him a bastard.

KYLE. When was that?

KENNY. All the time. I die all the time. And you assholes never remember!

STAN. I think we would remember you dying dude.

KENNY. Well, you don’t! I die over and over. Only to wake up in my bed like nothing happened.

STAN. Dude, you’re freakin’ out Mint-Berry Crunch. He’s peed his pants.

(season 14, episode 13, 2:08-2:49)

In fact, when Kenny dies in “Kenny Dies” (season 5, episode 13) and doesn’t return in the following episode for the first time, it is hugely significant, and happens to be an episode in which abortion figures highly. I discuss this in depth in my final chapter.

One important point to consider when distinguishing adult animated comedy from live action situation comedy is that almost no animated comedies have laugh tracks. Laugh tracks function to add to the energy of an episode, as well as indicate to the audience when they should laugh and what is funny. Without it, or without a live audience response, viewers need to discern for themselves what they find humorous; they may not get all the jokes or they may interpret satire as sincere.
Finally, much of the great (smart) adult animated comedy today is airing on cable and streaming platforms. There are still less restrictions on content creators there than on networks. Cable and streaming platforms are also likely to be motivated to push the envelope on content if it aligns with their brand because they know that’s why viewers are seeking them out. Viewers have so much choice today and cable networks program to attract specific demographics. One of the things that makes representation of abortion on the shows I studied so important is that they are not obscure; they are hugely successful and critically respected.

**CULTURE AND STIGMA**

It would be difficult to argue against television’s impact on American culture. “Television is a dead-on mirror of the times,” observed activist Susan Dworkin (Cole 88). For one, it has been influential on public opinion from its beginnings. In 1947, the Commission on Freedom of the Press (CFP, also known as the Hutchins Commission), published the results of a four-year study of mass communications, including television, and their influence on the American public. This independent commission was funded by grants from Time, Inc. and Encyclopedia Britannica. The Commission found that it would be very easy to influence the American public and that mass media was “taken together, however, probably the most powerful single influence today” (The Commission on Freedom of the Press vii). Television can be so persuasive, in part because it engages multiple senses (both sight and hearing, as opposed to just sight for newspapers or just hearing for radio). It can be physically hard to divert our attention from the screen.

98% of American homes have a television, with 82% of those homes having more than one TV (The Nielsen Company). According to Nielsen, in Q2 of 2017, Americans spent nearly six hours per weekday (5 hours and 56 minutes) watching live and DVR/time-shifted TV (The
Nielsen Company 13). Put another way, one-quarter of the average American’s day is spent watching television.

What are the implications? Television relays ideology as culture itself and at the same time is a mirror of how we see ourselves. Todd Gitlin suggests that the medium inherently has great influence:

Perhaps the deepest privatizing function of television, its most powerful impact on public life, may lie in the most obvious thing about it: we receive the images in the privacy of our living rooms, making public discourse and response difficult. At the same time, the paradox is that at any given time many viewers are receiving images discrepant with many of their beliefs, challenging their received opinions. (255)

Television can be a powerful medium to expose people to information that challenges their ideas about people and institutions foreign to their own experience. In fact, judging from ratings of controversial episodes, that may be a big appeal.

It’s becoming clear that representation of stigmatized groups on television is powerful and effective in combating stigma. Stigma is “a mark of shame or discredit; a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something” (Merriam-Webster). To be stigmatized is to be part of a group that has been culturally marginalized and often misrepresented because of misinformation.

**Defining abortion stigma and its power to cause harm**

Erving Goffman is one of the sociologists who has studied stigma. His definition accounts for the more personal effects of going against social norms. Goffman describes stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” which transforms a person “from a whole or usual person to a
tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 3). Abortion stigma specifically has special attributes noted by Kumar et al. as “a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to the ideals of womanhood” (Kumar, Hessini and Mitchell). But understanding that abortion stigma also affects family members, providers, allies, and other members of the community, Norris, et al. expand this definition to recognize “stigma [is] created across all levels of human interaction: Between individuals, in communities, in institutions, in law and government structures, and in framing discourses” (Norris, Bessett and Steinberg, PhD 550). They further identified major factors as to why abortion is stigmatized, including because: it violated “feminine ideals” of womanhood, it attributes personhood to the fetus (simultaneously erasing pregnant women), legal restrictions that reinforce the idea that abortion is morally wrong, myths that have been promulgated about abortion being unhealthy or dirty, and incentives by the anti-abortion movement to use stigma as a deliberate tactic.

Abortion stigma is dangerous. What I’m talking about isn’t conceptual violence— it is actual violence. When information about abortion is delivered in the media, it is often loaded with misinformation and misogyny. Misinformation ranges from why pregnant people choose the procedure to how it is performed. This occurs in both storylines on television programs (though the trend appears to be declining) and on the news media (where it is not).

The National Abortion Federation compiles annual violence and disruption statistics for clinics across the United States, and since 1977 has documented incidents ranging from access to clinics being blocked, to arson and vandalism, the theft of private medical records, anthrax and butyric acid attacks, arsons, bombings and attempted murder and murder (National Abortion Federation). In 2017, they reported 1,700 incidents of obstruction; 62 death threats or threats of
harm; 78,144 incidents of picketing and “activities such as intentionally changing clinic phone numbers and addresses online, falsely claiming facilities had closed or relocated, and posting vulgar, false or misleading reviews on providers’ websites” as well as much more (National Abortion Federation). These incidents are on the rise. One of the most surprising results of their reporting over the years is how many impressionable juveniles are committing serious crimes, such as arson and attempted murder.

While these statistics are disturbing, they also do not account for private stigma and violence that patients seeking abortion may have faced. In my work as an abortion doula I have been witness to a small facet of this. Patients are offered a choice of local or moderate anesthesia for procedures up to 12 weeks gestation at the clinic I volunteer with. If they choose moderate, they must have an escort home. While it would be possible for them to tell their escort that they needed to have anesthesia for another reason, sometimes patients choose to have local anesthesia rather than confide in someone that they are having an abortion procedure. Another case is when, despite having insurance coverage, patients choose to pay for their procedure out of pocket (which can also influence the decision to choose local versus moderate anesthesia) out of fear that a disapproving parent or partner will find the itemized procedure on the insurance. Recent research indicates that two out of three women having abortions anticipate stigma if others were to learn about it; 58% felt they needed to keep their abortion secret from friends and family (Shellenberg).

What I’ve also directly observed is that people who are affected by abortion stigma, and that is nearly everyone in some way, who do not have experience with abortion and are in the procedure room waiting for the doctor are affected by varying levels of anxiety. If the stigma is severe, this can manifest in increased perception of pain.
Due to the lack of discourse surrounding the procedure, patients will often ask what they should expect in terms of pain and reveal that they’ve been googling it. There is a lot of deliberately misleading information on the internet by anti-choice organizations, and so patients will talk about reading that they are at an increased risk of breast cancer, or that their next pregnancy is likely to end in miscarriage (both untrue). These are designed to stigmatize the procedure.

This is not to mention a patient’s possible ostracization from their partner, family or community members if they are unsupportive, or worse, violent, or cutting a patient off from resources.

Various studies on adolescents’ views on abortion indicate that they are highly influenced by portrayals in the media. One such study, by Rebecca Stone and Cynthia Waszak in 1992, found in focus groups:

The high level of ignorance about abortion may be a reflection of the teenagers’ source of information. They based most declarations of fact on hearsay, a personal experience, or something seen in a movie or on television. A few participants had seen the movie *Roe v. Wade* on television; others referred to the illegal abortion in the movie *Dirty Dancing* as their information source.

The film *Dirty Dancing* is set in 1963, before the legalization of abortion; the character Penny has an illegal procedure from an unqualified provider and nearly dies. The teens in the focus groups largely described abortion as dangerous and the language they used to describe the procedure and the women who chose the procedure was largely negative and otherwise shrouded in negative stereotypes (Stone and Waszack 56).
We know that representation on television has been effective in combating stigma because there are concrete examples of this, as well as intriguing academic studies. This is an important initiative because we cannot have a healthy society with stigmatized, traumatized groups, and other segments who feel empowered to use stigma as a tool of oppression.

Theories on media representation and stigma

Research on representation and mass media is ongoing; there is no single accepted unified theory. I have focused on two separate ideas of how representation is effective in combatting stigma that I believe combined form a compelling baseline for further research.

One idea builds on Elisabeth Noelle Neumann’s theory of the spiral of silence, discussed briefly in the introduction. The spiral of silence is an environment where there is a dominant point of view in a culture that discourages individuals from voicing opinions that run counter to that point of view; as individuals stay silent, “society then assumes that there is no opposition to the prevalent view and continues to accept it as the norm. As a result, those in disagreement have even greater incentive to stay quiet” (Levina, Waldo and Fitzgerald 740). In the absence of representation, such as television characters who have not chosen or considered abortion, a viewer might assume that abortion is rare. In viewers who reside in communities who propagate views that women who choose abortion are “baby killers,” selfish or have other characteristics based in misinformation, without other representation viewers may form their opinion of abortion in this spiral of silence, even whilst being exposed to vast amounts of mass media.

The second idea comes from a small research study published in 2011 conducted with individuals who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. The study aimed to discover the influence of media on how they viewed their gay, lesbian and bisexual identity. The first part of the study
was a quantitative survey group of 126, while the second was a one-on-one interview with 15. The authors of the study hypothesized that media could contribute to GLB identity because evidence exists that media influences us beginning from when we’re very young. We play act as characters from television and the movies from the time we’re toddlers and this modeling continues through adolescence. In fact, the authors did find many connections, from positive and negative portrayals of GLB characters as well as the effect of the absence of characters. One of the most striking findings was that even a negative portrayal could have a positive influence on a viewer. “The first memory of any gay presence in the media for Brian (31, White, gay) was his exposure to anti-gay religious tracts. However, he said that “Even though it was like really negative—it was a really negative little pamphlet—it was comforting.” Indeed, it appears that for some participants, any GLB presence in the media was comforting (Gomillion and Giuliano 344). This suggests that no representation is insignificant, which is in turn significant when we are examining representation of abortion in adult animated comedy, or abortion jokes. I propose further that this representation is in fact very significant, and its presence normalizes abortion. We talk and joke about things that affect our everyday lives, and that provides fodder for television dialogue. As one in four women will have an abortion in their lifetime, this procedure is one of those things.

    Healthy and normal representations of abortion in the media are important for communicating an accurate depiction of social norms. Rhetoric around abortion on scripted television continues to be negative or absent, and shows depict high morbidities and negative consequences for characters who choose abortion. The media is guilty of perpetuating the spiral of silence around abortion, in part because of sticking to morally rigid standards & practices
from bygone days of television history. Any representation of abortion continues to be significant.

**The Taboo and the Ratings Paradox**

In questioning taboos on television, it is important to consider how this affects viewers. A taboo is a social construct that indicates that a thing is forbidden by society. A more nuanced, sociological definition comes from Sigmund Freud (Encyclopedia Britannica):

Freud provided perhaps the most ingenious explanation for the apparently irrational nature of taboos, positing that they were generated by ambivalent social attitudes and in effect represent forbidden actions for which there nevertheless exists a strong unconscious inclination. A taboo in this sense is not a ban, but rather a general avoidance of the topic.

Some cultural taboos that we’ve seen broken on television include married couples sleeping in the same bed, premarital sex, divorce, interracial couples, single mothers, homosexual couples and characters with disabilities, including invisible disabilities such as HIV. The taboo on abortion in television does not mean it has not been a part of plotlines. Rather, there is a marked absence of storylines addressing abortion, and rhetorical avoidance of the word abortion, particularly when characters face an unplanned pregnancy. Freud’s identification of a “strong unconscious inclination,” or at least curiosity, could explain why episodes that address taboos have traditionally garnered strong ratings and not been avoided. It’s almost like people think they’re expected to avoid certain topics, but in the privacy of their own homes, they’re comfortable exploring and testing new ideas.
When television shows address taboo topics, as I will address elsewhere in this paper, they are often threatened with boycotts and the loss of advertisers. Yet the paradox is that ratings typically increase and the cost of spots go up (with the increased exposure making it a good deal for advertisers and networks).

In 1997, in response to pressure from right-wing groups, J.C. Penney and Chrysler dropped their advertising on Ellen De Generes’s eponymous ABC show Ellen in response to the announcement of her ‘coming out’ episode. If they had stuck with Ellen, they would have attached themselves to a major television event. In keeping with the taboo paradox, “the audience was the third largest for a single series episode in the history of television” (Hubert 31). 35% of the country tuned in (Levina, Waldo and Fitzgerald 738). There was clearly a huge hunger and curiosity to see a lesbian on television, and more than that, an actual lesbian who was playing a lesbian. People wanted exposure to something that they didn’t have access to in their everyday lives, even, perhaps especially, if it was taboo. And of course for others, this was representation that was validating. ABC was able to get premium ad rates, charging some advertisers a 20% premium (Hubert 31).

Parenthood’s “abortion episode,” “Small Victories,” was its season finale and aired January 8, 2013 on NBC. It led the major networks in the lucrative demographic 18-49. The strong performance helped get the show picked up for a fifth season and moved to a more desirable timeslot (Littleton). When Maude’s two-part episode about the lead character’s abortion decision was aired, nearly one-third of the American population tuned in and caught one or both of the episodes, either when it originally aired or when they were reshowed (Beale). Though the series was a success before the episodes, they propelled the series into the Nielsen Top 10 and made Maude the number 1 show in its time period. The episodes drew 41% of the
viewing audience. This success was achieved in spite of controversy that saw two of CBS’s nearly 200 affiliates refuse to carry the first-run of the episodes, and nearly 40 affiliates refuse to carry the re-runs. No corporate sponsors bought commercial time, missing out on a massive opportunity.

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF STIGMATIZED GROUPS AND ITS EFFECTS

Above I mentioned that there are examples of how television representation has been effective in combatting stigma. There’s no one model for this and representation can be impactful in different ways. The social factors at work are also distinctive, which is interesting to think about.

For example, the programs That Girl (1966-1971) and The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977) showed the evolving depiction of single working women on television, while behind the scenes, the programs opened up many unprecedented opportunities for female writers and crew members who in turn helped keep the program grounded in reality and meaningful storylines. The real-life social change was uncontrollable in many ways; though many women of color were already in the workforce, white women were now entering the labor force due to economic necessity. What the shows affected was how women were treated in the workplace and how women viewed their own career opportunities.

Conversely, with the original run of Will & Grace (1998-2006), social acceptance of these characters appeared to drive acceptance of gays and lesbians in society. Appearing on Meet the Press with David Gregory on May 6, 2012, Joe Biden became the highest-ranking U.S. official to openly endorse gay marriage. He went on to imply that the country was ready for change because “when the social culture changes…I think Will & Grace did more to educate the
American public more than anything anybody has done so far. People fear that which is different. Now they’re beginning to understand.” When *Will & Grace* came on the air, gay marriage wasn’t even legal in Massachusetts, the first state to legally recognize same sex marriage (on May 17, 2004). Not long after Biden’s remarks, in the grand scheme of history, on June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court established the federal right to same sex marriage and struck down remaining state bans.

In a *Daily Beast* feature written after *Will & Grace* returned for a second run, Debra Messing (Grace) is quoted sharing an anecdote about a woman who approached her in an airport in the Midwest:

Her introduction started alarmingly: ‘OK, my husband hates gays…’ But then she continued a story about how, at first, he wouldn’t even come into the room when she had *Will & Grace* on. Then he came in but would hide behind the newspaper. Then she’d hear him laughing from behind the paper. Eventually, he was walking around the house going, ‘Just Jack!’ (Fallon)

The show helped break the spiral of silence around homosexuality by introducing these characters into people’s homes. In this way, they would be seen not solely as a taboo but as a name and face. Moreover, stigma was preventing this woman’s husband from watching a very popular television program (well in the top twenty highest rated shows) until he perceived that it was socially acceptable to enjoy it.

And for those who felt alone and needed representation, the show was incredibly impactful. In a study by Sarah Gomillion and Traci Giuliano on the influence of media role models on gay, lesbian and bisexual identity, *Will & Grace* was named by multiple participants as an important source of visibility (though it was cited for both negative and positive portrayals
of gay characters). Ted stated that the show made him feel being gay could be socially acceptable:

I had never really been around gay people then, and so seeing straight people all over thinking that show was funny was really helpful in terms of like that they weren’t freaked out by it. So I was like, oh well, if they can deal with a sitcom where people are unapologetically gay, then that’s a good sign and that calms me a little. (Gomillion and Giuliano 346)

The importance of representation and media visibility was succinctly summarized by participant Mary:

While you’re thrashing around trying to figure out who you are, that’s the only real access you’ve got to what it means to be gay. You read anything you can get your paws on, you watch whatever gay movies are out there. I guess it’s a good way of trying to figure out what the heck it means to be different, and what does it look like? And it’s nice to know you’re not the only one in the universe. (Gomillion and Giuliano 344)

That unapologetic visibility is key because it allows people to have confidence in their authentic selves and offers hope, perhaps even a path to safety, when they may be surrounded by people who are homophobic.

In both the case of The Mary Tyler Moore Show and Will & Grace, representation of strong supporting female characters for the former and out gay characters in the latter greatly increased the representation of those characters on other programs in subsequent seasons.

Elizabeth Levy Paluck’s MacArthur Genius Grant award-winning research in Rwanda is worth special reflection (Paluck). She researched the results of a radio soap opera that was produced with the intention of reducing prejudice, trauma and violence between groups that had
been divided by genocide. Paluck wanted to know if it could be effective at changing beliefs, changing perceived social norms and/or changing behavior. She also investigated empathy and group discussion as possible processes for transformation. What she found was that while the media was not effective at changing personal beliefs, it did have a measurable effect on behavior and people’s perceptions of social norms. This demonstrates that thoughtful representation could be a valuable tool for reducing stigma.

In October 2017, Elizabeth Levy Paluck won this genius grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for her 2004 research in Rwanda on how media can be used to reduce bias. According to Paluck, only 10 field experiments on this have ever been done on the media’s impact on prejudice, all conducted on children in North American classrooms. Her research was the first randomized field experiment of its kind to measure the effect of mass media on prejudice and conflict. This in itself is a very complicated question from a psychological and practical standpoint, as so many different factors are involved. For starters, would conveying descriptive norms (how people actually behave) or prescriptive norms (how people should behave) influence behavior? Should people’s personal beliefs, views of social norms or behavior be targeted? Paluck ambitiously looked to an integrative model to measure all of these.

Rwanda was the site of a horrific genocide over 3 months in 1994 in which 10% of the population was slaughtered. The Tutsi ethnic minority was targeted, with 75% of the Tutsi population killed. The radio had a notable role in inciting violence in which civilians participated. Whereas television is the most important form of media in the U.S., radio is the most important form of media in Rwanda and citizens tend to listen in groups. The station RTLM (Radio Télévision Libre des Milles Collines) launched the year before the genocide and
included anti-Tutsi propaganda for the Hutu government. In a landmark case, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda convicted the radio station’s founders for crimes of genocide, arguing that radio “set the stage” for genocide (Prosecutor v. Nahimana, Barayagwiza, & Ngeze, 2003, p. 29” (Paluck 576). Ten years later, the radio would be utilized as a healing tool. The NGO LaBenevolencija produced a soap opera radio program called Musekeweya (New Dawn), designed to promote healing and reconciliation through incorporating educational messages about trauma and violence, and by including typical Rwandans as characters in storylines designed to change social norms. Paluck designed an experiment to test if the soap opera was effective at changing beliefs, changing perceived social norms and/or changing behavior. She also investigated empathy and group discussion as possible processes for this transformation, if it occurred. Of note is that the program was very popular (the control group listened to it on a delay, on cassette tapes, to avoid being improperly influenced).

The study was designed to reflect the way that Rwandans listen to the radio in groups. The control group was assigned to listen to a soap opera about reproductive health and AIDS. Communities represented different regional, ethnic and political groups, and 40 individuals from each were selected for smaller focus groups (to listen to the programs together and be observed doing so). After to listening to the soap operas over the course of one year, individuals were interviewed, focus groups were conducted and the groups’ behavior was again observed. Statements of personal belief included “Recovery from trauma is possible,” and “Perpetrators of violence can also be traumatized.” Statements of social norms included “There is mistrust in my community” and the reverse-coded statement “I advise my children (or the ones I will have in the future) that they should only marry people from the same regional, religious or ethnic group as our own.”
Paluck’s findings were striking. Though participants’ personal beliefs did not change, their behavior aligned with their perceptions of social norms. In other words, when social norms changed for the better, people wanted to fit in and changed their public responses even if they privately held different opinions. She found “the treatment effect is large and significant” on perceived social norms. “Those exposed to the reconciliation program were between .25 and .28 probits more likely to reject prescriptions of in-group marriage. Expressed in percentage point terms, this implies that a person who would otherwise have a 50% likelihood of advising in-group marriage would have a roughly 40% likelihood if assigned to the reconciliation condition.”

This group’s feelings around intermarriage and why it brings peace were also impacted. “Reconciliation focus groups stated more frequently that intermarriage sets an example or creates a new social norm about relationships between ethnic groups or alters attitudes in the family and community,” while 11% of the health group comments (none in the reconciliation group) spoke of intermarriage as a private decision between individuals.

Any research that aims to uncover how we can reduce prejudice is valuable. Paluck’s findings that people may hold different private beliefs and public opinions (that align with social norms) are particularly relevant to combatting abortion stigma because there are parallels with individuals’ behaviors around abortion. In the U.S., it is not uncommon for someone to profess they are opposed abortion and yet privately undergo the procedure when they find they need it, or in other cases, support a friend or family member who does. Still others are publically opposed to abortion and yet will make the distinction to selectively support what they deem “good” abortions (in the case of the rape of minors or unviable pregnancies). This topic is very complex in part because it’s not openly discussed, and people’s reasons for holding their beliefs are formed by many different influences.
Findings like Paluck’s show how we might shift violence against women with realigning perceptions of social norms by depicting those norms accurately, reflecting that the majority of Americans support safe and legal access to abortion. In television programs, this could be accomplished by mirroring real-life in terms of characters’ choices and support for abortion. It would be relatively easy. When a character is faced with an unplanned or unviable pregnancy, abortion should be discussed, if a patient undergoes the procedure there should not be negative complications for the sake of drama (it’s a safe procedure), characters shouldn’t express undue regret afterwards (as the most common feeling afterwards is relief), characters should receive professional care, recovery should be reasonable (a hot pack, some Tylenol, some Netflix) and they should be supported by their friends and family. If there’s any drama, it can easily be created by characters encountering real-life issues such as unreasonable obstacles to accessing the procedure, financially, distance-wise or with waiting periods. Of course there needs to be the will to do so.

ABORTION ON TELEVISION

The first abortion on television was on the soap opera Another World in 1964. This was pre-\textit{Roe v. Wade} and the show was set in Michigan, so lead character Pat Matthews travelled to New York City for the (illegal) procedure with her boyfriend Tom Baxter. Though the procedure was a success, she was left with an infection that left her sterile, and when she told Tom, he told her that he never loved her. In a rage, she killed him (later, she was able to have surgery to correct the effects of the infection and gave birth to twins) (Newcomb). There are a lot of interesting aspects to this—it was a storyline on a show primarily consumed by women, written by a woman (Irna Phillips), but began a troubling precedent of showing dire consequences for women who
bucked feminine ideals and chose abortion. Of course, prior to Roe v. Wade, troubling outcomes were more common.

The first show to depict legal abortion was Maude, a spin-off of All in the Family created by Norman Lear, and tackled in its first season in a two-part episode entitled “Maude’s Dilemma” that aired November 14 and 21, 1972. Bea Arthur’s title character chooses to have an abortion due to her unexpected pregnancy and advanced age, and is supported by her husband and adult daughter in her decision (“Maude’s Dilemma”). This was not initially conceived as a topical episode. It was written in response to a contest by the group Zero Population Growth that had announced a $10,000 prize for a comedy that tackled a plotline relating to population control. The original draft involved the pregnancy of Maude’s neighbor and a discussion of Maude’s husband getting a vasectomy. The series creator Norman Lear rejected the script in favor of a more socially relevant, as well as funnier, story (Beale). “The more interesting story seemed to be, what would this 47-year-old woman really do in her life,” Lear said. “And the conclusion we reached was that her family would be thoroughly involved in the deepest concern about all this.”

CBS originally refused to fund the taping of “Maude’s Dilemma.” It was show runner Norman Lear who stood up to the network and demanded that the episode be shot as scheduled, the only concession being the addition of the character of a neighbor who was depicted as a happy mother with a lot of children. Of course you’ll recognize how offensive that is, and how it plays to abortion stigma in silently claiming that abortion violates the ideals of womanhood.

Two Illinois stations (WMBD in Peoria and WCIA in Champaign-Urbana) refused to air the episodes, as decided by their program directors. There was community support in favor of viewing the shows though. This is an excerpt from a letter to the editor of Peoria’s The Journal
Star: “We suppose we should thank WMBD for keeping us morally straight and protecting us from the realities of the world which we long had hoped the media would begin to represent with a greater degree of authenticity” (Mihevc, Neulieb and Holdridge).

After “Maude’s Dilemma” aired, opponents of abortion rights petitioned CBS for airtime under the FCC’s Fairness Doctrine. The Fairness Doctrine, which was repealed in 1987, was instituted with the intent to promote public discourse, at a time when the FCC licensed broadcasters and few channels were available. The Fairness Doctrine stipulated that for every controversial issue of public importance discussed on a broadcast, the station must provide time for the opposing viewpoint, even if this was at the licensee’s expense. This also applied to entertainment programs. The Maude opposition who appealed to the FCC lost, however, on the grounds that “balance need not be exhibited within the same program so long as it was evident in the broadcaster’s schedule as a whole” (Parry 69). The United States Catholic Conference also took aim at “Maude’s Dilemma” and got 25 affiliates to not run re-runs of the episodes that summer. However, Maude remained an indelibly popular show, beloved for its outspoken leading lady and known for tackling timely topics.

The next depiction of abortion came the following year on another soap opera, All My Children. It was a landmark because it was the first storyline after abortion became legal nationwide with Roe v. Wade. Erica Kane, a successful model, was married to a doctor. When she became pregnant, she had a legal abortion because she didn’t want to derail her career. It was a great moment for feminism. Unfortunately, as with Pat’s abortion on Another World, there were complications—the procedure left her with an infection and it damaged her marriage. Decades later, this storyline got even worse when a different writer, Megan McTavish, decided to re-write history and make it so that Kane hadn’t had an abortion at all. Rather, McTavish
wrote a story where the provider Kane had visited had transplanted her fetus into someone else’s uterus without her knowledge or consent, turning a moment of powerful television history into one of violation (Mulcahy Jr.).

And so, it’s been a real mixed bag in terms of how abortion has been represented in plots. A University of California study in 2013 attempted to analyze this by reviewing abortion-related plots in American film and television as categorized on imdb.com and Google (Sisson and Kimport). They focused on plotlines where abortion was a key part of the plot, and separately, on plotlines where a primary character was a provider (but the plotline does not directly engage with a woman considering or choosing abortion). There have been 141 such plotlines on television from 1953 through 2012. 69% of these plotlines aired on network television, and 90% of these aired during primetime. Sisson and Kimport further analyzed abortion outcomes for characters in 302 plotlines. Though they did not separate this analysis between film and television, there are striking patterns worth noting. First, there is a 9.6% decline in representations of pregnancy decisions that resolve in abortion post-Roe v. Wade (after 1973). There was a simultaneous increase of plotlines resolving in adoption and miscarriage. Most disturbingly, plotlines that resolved in abortion resulted in a woman’s death 15.7% of the time. Separately, there was morbidity following fictional abortions, which the study was unable to measure due to its design.

In the most recent decade, 2003-2012, adoption represented 9% of all characters’ pregnancy outcomes and pregnancy loss represented 7%. The hidden concern about these messages is that the percentage of infants given up for adoption in the United States is currently at 1% annually, not 9% (POV). Miscarriage is actually much more common, representing one in five pregnancies. It is not the 7% pregnancy loss representation that is a concern as much as pregnancy loss’s use as a plot device to rid characters of unwanted pregnancies. Miscarriage is
accompanied by its own grief for parents, and stigma in the United States. It is a common occurrence, but not commonly discussed. When represented on television, characters are not often given plotlines that depict them moving through a grieving process.

In real life, abortion is a very safe procedure with a rate of complications of less than 0.05% (Guttmacher Institute). It is alarming that abortion on television is depicted as unsafe for women, resulting in a character’s death 15.7% of the time (that figure includes plots where the character was murdered or committed suicide after choosing abortion). One such plotline was a 2010 episode of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (Weitz). It contained incorrect information about the controversial abortifacient misoprostol. The character of a young woman died on the show following an accidental abortion induced when her boyfriend used a misoprostol-containing compound during sex. “Wait,” Benson (the female detective) asks, “I thought you said misoprostol was safe?” “It is,” the coroner responds, “when it is taken orally, not when it is applied directly to the cervix.” However, misoprostol is safe and often prescribed to be taken vaginally. Not only does the young woman die, but misinformation about the safety of a commonly used, safe and affordable drug has been qualified by a popular television program. As noted in the Sisson and Kimport study,

The frequency with which abortion is portrayed as having adverse outcomes may be unique. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation, for example, is consistently shown as less risky and far more successful on television than is true of real life. (417)

Despite these setbacks, there have been a number of rich representations of characters thoughtful considerations of the decision to have an abortion in the last decade. Many of these have occurred on cable TV (on programs such as Sex and the City, Six Feet Under, Mad Men, The Fosters, Girls) but also have occurred on broadcast television (Friday Night Lights, Grey’s
Anatomy, Parenthood). These include depictions of likeable characters who have had abortions in the past. Considering that over forty years have elapsed since “Maude’s Dilemma,” this is a short list. Planned Parenthood VP of Communications Eric Ferrero has remarked (Stampler):

I think a discussion on how abortion is treated on TV is often a very short discussion because it’s very rare. As you go back and look at Maude and Friday Night Lights and Grey’s Anatomy and Parenthood, in terms of rich portrayals it’s a very short list. Even if a character is weighing her options, abortion won’t be spoken about, which only increases the shame.

The list has been further abbreviated because an episode of the popular teen series Degrassi: The Next Generation featuring a character’s decision to have an abortion has never been seen in the United States (Arthur). Originally attributed to a scheduling issue, the network “the N” has censored the Canadian import for American audiences. With the advent of social media and blogs, a positive development is that showrunners are beginning to be held accountable for their portrayals of pregnant people and abortions on television, on sites like remember-the-abortion-episode.tumblr.com, which gives a letter grade to these portrayals.

Shonda Rhimes is a highly successful showrunner who has featured abortion storylines on her popular programs Grey’s Anatomy and Scandal. She’s just entered an eight-show, $150 million dollar deal with Netflix. Her feeling is that it is a showrunner’s responsibility to write the topic into her characters’ experiences (Stampler). As Rhimes says, “It’s a polarizing issue obviously. Because it is such a hot button issue, because people are debating it, it should be discussed. And I’m not sure why it’s not being discussed.”

Considering women make up 50.8% of the U.S. population, and hold nearly 60% of its consumer wealth (Virginia Tech), it seems only right that issues of concern to women be
depicted fairly and accurately on television. Given the taboo paradox, it almost certainly will pay off for advertisers and cable/streaming providers, too.

UNDER THE RADAR ABORTION HUMOR

Very early in the first season of BoJack Horseman ("BoJack Hates the Troops"), BoJack’s new ghostwriter, Diane, comes to his house to interview him for material for his overdue autobiography.

Figure 1: “BoJack Hates the Troops.” BoJack Horseman, season 1, episode 2, Netflix, 22 Aug 2014, Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/7029931?trackId=200257859. (00:09:02).

Diane. Let's start at the beginning. What was your childhood like?

BoJack. Normal.

Diane. Normal?
BOJACK. Eh, it was, uh, normal...normal childhood stuff.

[Flashback]

BOJACK’S MOTHER. Here's your omelet. I'm sorry it's not as good as the omelets your secretary makes, but then, you're not married to your secretary, are you?

BOJACK’S FATHER. Well, maybe if my secretary also refused to get an abortion I would be.

YOUNG BOJACK. Mommy, can I have an omelet?

BOJACK’S MOTHER. You're the birthday boy.

[End flashback]

BOJACK. Normal childhood, and then just get right into the big famous part.

(season 1, episode 2, 8:41-9:22)

It’s a savage, hilarious joke that works on multiple levels, made even better by the cheerful background music in the flashback with accompanying visuals of little BoJack in a sailor suit, the cigarette hanging out of his mother’s mouth and the 1950s neat, clean kitchen and façade of respectability and perfect family life. Even without being the focus of a full episode, these lines told a story in a short amount of time and maintained a core of honesty; they told us a little more about the character’s background. In this way, the joke is more than a throwaway line (because in fact, BoJack’s stress from his parents’ failing marriage and feeling like his parents never wanted him explains his deep-seeded commitment issues and fear of rejection, as well as his aversion to having a child with Princess Carolyn, which is touched on in the first episode). Further, the set-up doesn’t denigrate the secretary who has presumably made the choice to have an abortion.
The writers of the BoJack joke use misplaced focus and shock to take on infidelity (revealing not only is BoJack’s father having an affair, but implying that his secretary got an abortion), and that they’re talking about this unplanned and unwanted pregnancy not just in front of said child but on his birthday. As funny as this scene is, it feels like it could be real.

British scholar Simon Critchley has found three fundamental reasons why people laugh at jokes: “from feelings of superiority over others, as a release of pent up energy, and as a result of an incongruity between what we know or expect and what actually takes place.” (Dagnes, 13). That release of pent up energy is often from playing with power dynamics, such as in satire; releasing tension between the powerless and the powerful.

Molly Ivins describes satire as “traditionally the weapon of the powerless against the powerful. I only aim at the powerful. When satire is aimed at the powerless it is not only cruel—it’s vulgar” (Dagnes 13). Another term for aiming satire at the powerful is “punching up;” when aimed at the powerless (or less powerful) the term is “punching down.” There are obvious power dynamics at play when it comes to abortion.

Inevitably, there will be groups who declare that humor around abortion should be off-limits. This is another tactic designed to silence conversation around abortion. First, abortion humor is rarely about the procedure itself. Humor is a tool and how some people best process emotions and work through tension and distress. It pervades our everyday lives. Demanding that particular topics be off-limits for humor is silencing speech and prevents an important form of discussion.
Research Methods

Scott Dikkers, founding editor of *The Onion*, claims that every conceivable joke can fall into one of 11 categories: irony, character (personality traits), reference (common experiences), shock, parody, hyperbole, wordplay, analogy, mad-cap, meta humor (jokes about jokes), and misplaced focus (Johnson). Since as I mentioned abortion itself is rarely about the procedure itself, these categories were helpful in enabling me to think critically about the true subject of a joke and power dynamics at play.

Before I could categorize jokes, first I needed to pull them. My objective was to do a broad assessment of abortion dialogue in adult animated comedy, as well as a deep dive into particular episodes. I chose a selection of shows that would represent this genre’s variety both in style and how it is delivered to viewers. All of these programs are popular, and while some are long-running, some are relatively new. I chose to have representation from a broadcast network, cable and streaming. In alphabetical order, they are vi:

*Archer* (FX), 2009-present

*BoJack Horseman* (Netflix), 2014-present

*Family Guy* (FOX), 1998-presentvii

*Rick & Morty* (Adult Swim/Cartoon Network), 2013-present

*South Park* (Comedy Central), 1997-present

Because comedy is not always direct (it can be visual, or a solecism, etc.), I knew that the only reliable way for me to find incidences of abortion dialogue or references would be to watch these programs and record them myself, which is exactly what I did. Using a combination of Hulu, Netflix and iTunes Season Pass, I watched the complete series of each of the above programs, transcribing each incidence into a google doc with different tabs for each show. I recorded the
name of the program, the season number, the episode number (in that season), the episode title and the time stamps for where that dialogue could be found.

**Archer**

*Archer* is a fun, sexy genre parody about an agency operating on the edge of the law, getting themselves into dangerous scrapes around the world. In the early seasons, the group were secret agents for hire led by Mallory Archer. Created by Adam Reed, the show debuted on FX on September 17, 2009 and completed its ninth season (110 episodes) in the summer of 2018. Its ninth season was the first to air on FXX. Lately, the show has been time-hopping into new forms, taking on film noir and turning the characters into detectives in 1940s Los Angeles, for example. Through it all, Sterling Archer (Mallory’s son) is dashing, substance-abusing, womanizing and a crack shot. He’s notoriously unreliable until it’s time to save the day. His mother Mallory is nearly the opposite. Crushingly competent and hard-working, Mallory is ruthless (perhaps in part because she was a single mother). Though she’s not always forthcoming with the truth about her personal life and work, she is paradoxically a speaker of harsh truths when it comes to what she thinks of other people. For all their high-flying, mafia-killing, yakuza drift racing shenanigans, a fair amount of Archer’s humor comes from the mundane—jokes about Flex accounts, that mess in the office refrigerator, grammar…

There are five references to abortion in the first eight seasons of *Archer*. Three of those are concentrated in the fifth season (the first that deviates from the spy agency conceit; the season is named *Archer Vice* and imagines the characters as cocaine smugglers). Sterling’s on-again, off-again love interest Lana Kane is pregnant (the father is revealed to be Sterling in the season finale), and many of her colleagues, who, as recent employees of a spy agency slash
current cocaine dealers, are perplexed by her choice, given their lifestyle. For the show as a whole, it really made sense to address that question, especially as Lana has always been driven, brilliant, career-minded and tough as nails, though with a soft spot for Sterling. She’s not a traditional maternal figure. That is likely why the bulk of these references aren’t necessarily laugh out loud jokes, but they are all in character.

The first mention in the fifth season doesn’t have anything to do with Lana at all—it’s a hyperbolic dig at PBS from Mallory in episode 5 (“Southbound & Down”), accusing the station of taking donations “Of pre-tax dollars! From pot-taking, Bolshevik, lesbian couples! Then PBS mixes it all right in with their huge NEA grants and launders it in inner city methadone clinics, and pumps it right back out to pro-abortion super PACs!” Mallory’s really more cranky that the music act she’s managing isn’t getting paid to perform on PBS, and as is her way, she’s being sharp about it. The joke pokes fun at Mallory herself. After all, who says “pot-taking” and not “pot-smoking?” And of course, Mallory is a mess of contradictions. Politically conservative and pro-abortion herself, she is a very wealthy woman (who is likely a tax evader) known to try to control people with money, who is at that very moment trying to unload 200 pounds of cocaine.

The next abortion reference comes in the following episode (“Baby Shower”). Since the agency has disbanded, Lana’s had no income. She approaches Mallory asking for some help.

LANA. I, um. Okay, so, as you know, or should know, I’m pregnant…

MALLORY. Lana, it’s too late to…

LANA. Uh, uh, let me stop you. Having the baby, don’t know why that’s such a mind bender for everybody, but…

MALLORY. Welll…

(season 5, episode 6, 9:38-10:15)
This exchange implies that it’s not the first time Lana’s gotten this response (or suggestion to have an abortion) from someone she works with. The joke is meant to shock or surprise because it’s unexpected. Lana is visibly pregnant and clearly has no intention of having an abortion. Yet it’s entirely in character for Mallory, the cynic and person with worldly experience, to try to help problem solve for her. The joke is that Mallory hones in on the wrong problem. In the very next episode (“Smuggler’s Blues”), there’s a play on what happened in “Baby Shower.” Cheryl, extremely spoiled and naïve, asks Lana “Is it too late to not have it?” Lana erupts, “Yes! For the jillionth time, I want this baby, so—.” But this time, Mallory interrupts, and it turns into a character joke about her son.

Sure, now! Wait until you’re waist deep in dirty diapers, or he’s up with the croup and there’s no bourbon in the house. Then fast-forward to him knocking up the au pair, flunking out of college, and then single-handedly bankrupting your drug cartel!

(season 5, episode 7, 0:00-2:07)

Some might interpret this as a suggestion that Mallory is regretting not having an abortion when it came to her decision about parenting, but based on her emphasis on the last part of the sentence (“and then single-handedly…”) and the madcap dialogue that follows I think that it’s more she’s merely expressing her frustration with Sterling, as she is prone to do (and he often has earned it). Clearly, the characters have no moral qualms about abortion and it would be a perfectly acceptable reproductive health choice.

The very first time Archer references abortion is with a character joke, referencing Sterling’s promiscuity. It opens episode 6 of the first season (“Skorpio”). Mallory is criticizing Sterling for being irresponsible. Like most of their exchanges, it spirals. In multiple flashbacks,
it’s revealed that Archer has gotten his cook, Pita, pregnant three times, and paid for three abortions.

Figure 2: “Skorpio.” Archer, season 1, episode 6, FX, 11 Feb 2010, Hulu, www.hulu.com/watch/129295#i0,p4,d0. (00:00:55).

[Flashback]

ARCHER. Oh, it's pretty late though. Why don't you, uh, take a cab?
PITA. Mister Sterling...I have problem. (Holding up pregnancy test.)

ARCHER. I'll pay for it.

[Second flashback, Pita throwing up.]

ARCHER. Again? Seriously, Pita!

[Third flashback. Pita lifts serving tray lid on a pregnancy test.]

ARCHER. You're killing me here. Again?! This was, uh, supposed to be coconut
shrimp."

[Back to office with Mallory]

ARCHER. One, three times. But it's the Pope's fault she won't let me wear a condom.

MALLORY. Why don't you wear a vasectomy?!

ARCHER. This, again? Don't you want a grandkid?

MALLORY. Well, if I did, I'd just scrape all your previous mishaps into a big pile and knit a onesie for it.

ARCHER. Jesus Christ.

MALLORY. Sorry, I've been fasting and I'm edgy.

ARCHER. Still, though.

(season 1, episode 6, 0:00-1:49)

Mallory warns Sterling to take the assignment seriously, then when he mentions his kitchen in asking for details on the bounty, she takes the opening to criticize his previous design choices, choice of mistress and takes aim at him for not listening to her about birth control. Pita’s decision making isn’t questioned or stigmatized. It’s unique because multiple abortions are not uncommon but it’s rarely addressed on television (South Park also addresses this in season 13, episode 10 “W.T.F.” and Family Guy has a few references to this). What also stands out is Mallory’s unsentimental barb about “previous mishaps.” She rejects the idealized portrait of womanhood that stigmatizes abortion through her blunt language, and also rejects the stereotype of women her age being docile and excited about the prospect of grandchildren. If anyone ever saw Mallory Archer knitting, they’d know something was very wrong. In fact, in later seasons
she proves herself to be a rather unconventional, though loving, grandmother once her
granddaughter A.J. is born.

The final reference, in *Archer*’s “Dreamland” season, uses irony, and actually abortion is
a minor part of the plot. Sterling is hired by Charlotte (known as Cheryl in previous seasons) to
fake her own death. To do so, Charlotte has taken the body of a young woman who was
impregnated by Charlotte’s brother and subsequently died in a botched abortion at the hands of a
drunken doctor.

ARCHER. Did you kill her?
CHARLOTTE. No, Jesus! My brother did. Well, technically I suppose the
drunken abortionist did, but my brother got her pregnant in the first place, and
my father would have killed her if she refused to get an abortion, so...
ARCHER. But I mean, not really...
CHARLOTTE. Really. Why do you think my father started the Spanish-American
War?
ARCHER. Wasn't it sugar?
CHARLOTTE. He got my aunt pregnant.
ARCHER. And sugar?
CHARLOTTE. I guess. I don't know! Shut up! The point is...this poor girl was
dead the minute her panties hit the straw.

(season 8, episode 2, 4:00-5:52)
The timeframe is important here. Although death is now quite a rare complication, the episode is
set in 1947 when patients were dying from improperly performed illegal abortions, and the
dialogue reflects the harsh realities for women at the time. Charlotte at no time expresses that
she’s glad this woman died because she was accessing abortion. She calls her “poor girl”
multiple times and no one in the episode blames her for her choices, though it’s implied she was coerced, which is actually another important and underrepresented perspective.

**BoJack Horseman**

When *BoJack Horseman* addresses contemporary issues, it goes big. Whether addressing depression, dementia, addiction, miscarriage or abortion, *BoJack*’s showrunners have devoted multiple episodes to nuanced, emotionally raw episodes that are relevant and full of humor. The show premiered on Netflix on August 22, 2014 (the full season was released in one go) and its fifth season and most recent season debuted September 14, 2018. There are fifteen abortion references in the first three seasons of the show, most of them in the season 3, episode 6 “Brrap Brrap, Pew Pew” (the other was in the intro to this chapter). I stopped analyzing at season 3, but want to note abortion also was addressed in a main storyline in the masterful “Time’s Arrow” (season 4, episode 11).

The origin of “Brrap Brrap, Pew Pew” is that Raphael Bob-Waksberg, creator and showrunner, proposed that a main character decide to have an abortion. Diane was an obvious choice. The episode was written by Joanna Calo (who is also executive story editor and co-producer) and directed by Amy Winfrey. It doesn’t feel like a coincidence that women created a story with a lot of nuance and layers. "That was the plan, from the beginning: Let's tell a story about someone who knows this is right for her, has a supportive partner, but does kind of have to go through the process," Calo said. "We tried to make it — in our ridiculous cartoon world — very grounded" (Lange).
The episode is radical because it’s unabashed. It directly comments on the silence and shame around abortion and both directly and in a meta way by loudly speaking about women’s choices and the barriers facing their access to care. It’s also radical because it’s telling the story from a woman’s perspective, from her discovery of an unplanned and undesired pregnancy, to her decision-making to consulting about the procedure to recovery. It doesn’t create drama in the form of unlikely health complications or Diane’s partner Mister Peanutbutter having a change of heart and wanting to have children. All-in-all, there are 42 spoken and visual incidences of the word abortion (including close variations like aborted) in the episode. That may be unprecedented.

In “Brrap Brrap Pew Pew,” Diane has taken on the role of social media manager for teen music sensation Sextina Aquafina. She accompanies BoJack to the afterparty for the Golden Snowflake Awards, where he’s distracting her by trying to get her attention as she tweets for celebrity clients. He interprets her annoyance as her problem, not a reaction to his interruptions, and as she tries to answer him as to “What’s up your butt tonight?” while multitasking, she accidentally tweets “I’m getting an abortion” to Sextina’s 40 million followers.

At the heart of this is Diane’s experience. She has a supportive partner who was in the room when she found out she was unexpectedly pregnant. On the drive home they discuss their situation, which ends in a mapcap, silly joke.

DIANE. Let's just both say what we want at the same time, on the count of three.

MISTER PEANUTBUTTER. Okay.

DIANE. One...two...

MISTER PEANUTBUTTER. On three, or after three?

DIANE. How could I say it on three, I'll be saying three.
MISTER PEANUTBUTTER. Okay. Okay.

DIANE. One...two...three. Abortion.

MISTER PEANUTBUTTER. Get an abortion. Oh, no! We said different things.

(season 3, episode 6, 0:13-1:12)

At first the drama for her situation comes not from electing the procedure, but from her social media mistake at work. It’s all over the news, including “Tom’s Rant,” and clearly not going away. The irony that the media would be criticizing someone for discussing abortion on twitter while using the topic to generate news is the joke. One might even read into it and see the joke as a metaphor for other anti-choice hypocrisy, which decries abortion as foul and yet uses every opportunity to elaborate on the imagined grotesque details of the procedure. Newsman Tom later convenes a panel asking “has the concept of women having choices gone too far?” Of course the only guests are buttoned up men (standing in for white men), in a parody of panels on television and in Congress. It also directly parodies legislators who are ignorant about reproductive health and choices while being empowered to control them. Referencing then-Representative Todd Akin of Missouri, who in 2012 responding to a question in which he was asked if abortion should be legal for pregnancies resulting from rape, “From what I understand from doctors, that’s really rare… If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down” (Ziv), the panel on BoJack Horseman offers this exchange:

FOGGY ST. JERUSALEM. Are abortions even necessary? I heard a theory that if a woman really has an unwanted pregnancy, the body has a way to break the fetus down into gas particles, and then she can just fart it out.

TOM JUMBO-GRUMBO. Where did you hear this intriguing "fart it out" theory?

ST. JERUSALEM. I don't remember. Maybe the Bible?
JUMBO-GRUMBO. Thank you for clarifying.

(season 3, episode 6, 11:27-12:35)

Akin is far from the only legislator to hold those views and this parody of out-of-touch decision makers remains relevant.

Diane’s frustrations build as she encounters unnecessary obstacles at the clinic. The script plays on how offensive they are (on the pretext of women’s health) by parodying them. The first one is real (some states require patients to view an ultrasound and/or listen to a heartbeat even if it’s not medically necessary and they object). *BoJack Horseman* writers pull no punches when it comes to mocking these inane regulations. There are some inconsistencies in that while mocking the regulations, they unfortunately give the appearance that the (male) doctor is a little gruff.

[In parking lot of Planned Parrothood. Signs read 'Babies are fun,' 'Life begins in the egg,' and 'They kill puppies!' Inside doctor's office, diplomas are displayed, and there's a poster for 'Udder Self-Exam."

DOCTOR. So, before the procedure, you'll need to look at an ultrasound and look at the heartbeat. Or heartbeats, if you're having a litter.

MISTER PEANUTBUTTER. Why does she have to listen to the heartbeat?

DOCTOR. It's the law. Also, by law, I have to tell you that at one month your puppies have a favorite color, and that puppy may be blue.

DIANE. That can't be true.

DOCTOR. By law, I have to tell you that. Also, before your procedure, you'll need to watch 20 hours of cute puppy videos as Sarah McLachlan's "I Will Remember You" plays softly.

MISTER PEANUTBUTTER. Don't worry, Diane, I will watch the cute puppy
videos for you. It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

DOCTOR. No, she has to watch the videos.

MISTER PEANUTBUTTER. Don't worry, Diane, we will watch the cute puppy videos together.

DOCTOR. No, she has to watch them alone.

MISTER PEANUTBUTTER. Diane, I have some terrible news.

(season 3, episode 6, 6:56-7:39)

Throughout the episode, Mister Peanutbutter really tries to be supportive. He even accompanies Diane to the procedure carrying a balloon originally designed with the words “It’s a Boy,” but Mister Peanutbutter has crossed out “a boy” and written over it with “aborted.” Yet despite his support, it’s shown that this is something that affects Diane uniquely because she is the target of attempts at stigmatization and she must be strong to get through it independently. This is not like she’s going in to get her tonsils out; abortion is treated differently and thus affects patients differently. BoJack Horseman subtly and smartly acknowledges this.

When Sextina discovers that she’s trending because of the tweet, she not only doesn’t fire Diane, she decides to pretend that she’s actually getting an abortion. Of note is that Diane tells Sextina “Taylor Swift just tweeted that you were “brave.” Nicki Minaj tweeted at you a face with heart eyes.” This may be a reference to a spat on twitter between the two music icons the previous year about how black women in music are under-recognized when it comes to awards (Filipovic), or to Swift’s recently declared feminism and Minaj’s public acknowledgement that she had an abortion as a teenager. Diane is reticent from the beginning, while Princess Carolyn acquiesces to keep her client.
The irony is that while Diane is convincing Sextina that abortion is a serious subject and that she could be a role model for her fans if she takes her responsibility seriously, Sextina does do that, but the two wind up disagreeing over Sextina’s methods. Having made her decision, which she could have kept to the single tweet and lying by omission, instead Sextina decides to not only shoot a music video about her abortion but to fake her live abortion for her fans. The video is outrageous, in the sense that it’s “very bold, unusual and startling.” Diane watches Sextina’s interview with “A Ryan Seacrest Type” (the character’s actual name) where she announces the title of her new gangsta rap single: “Get Dat Fetus, Kill Dat Fetus.” The lyrics include “I’m a baby killer, baby killing makes me horny. Aliens inside me, I’m gonna squash it like Sigourney.” Diane questions her methods, and Sextina responds proudly “Look, when you get an abortion, you can express yourself however you want, but this is my body and my choices. And my choice is to be a totally insane badass.” Sextina refuses to be silenced because social norms dictate so. She also rebels against the narrative that women should feel disempowered by choosing abortion, and so takes control of negative rhetoric by turning it around and owning the hyperbole and mischaracterizations. We hear more of the song’s lyrics over the end credits. They could be construed as offensive, though Sextina is merely co-opting the language of the anti-choice movement: that women should be made to listen to fetal heartbeats, that their fetuses have souls and feel pain, that women who have abortions are bad people. When she takes it to the next level as a joke, Diane is concerned that she’s sending the wrong message and offending people. It’s only when a fellow patient at the clinic relates relief that Sextina was able to joke about the procedure and make it “less scary” that Diane relaxes.
Notable is the ending of the episode, when the doctor asks Sextina (following the staged abortion) how she’s feeling and Sextina replies, “A little queasy, but on the whole, wonderful.” That’s accurate and reflective of real-life experiences. Diane’s response to Princess Carolyn’s inquiry as to how she’s feeling, “I feel shitty. I mean, physically” is valid and not misleading, too. Diane is taking it easy with her boss/friend and isn’t depicted in dire straits. She doesn’t suffer unrealistic medical complications or experiences infertility or other issues. It is an honest representation.

For many, the episode may feel more relatable than “ha-ha” funny. There is a certain relief in naming oppressors so that they can feel more manageable. There are some funny visual details, as there are in all BoJack Horseman episodes like Mister Peanutbutter’s aforementioned
balloon and details in the music video like band-aids on Sextina’s knees. Importantly, the clinic
is depicted as a very supportive place where patients can get trustworthy care.

Personally I feel the ending is a little clumsy. In an attempt to affirm that every person
has the right to choose what is best for them, the writers created a surprise twist where Sextina
discovers that she’s pregnant for real, but wants to keep the baby. As this needed to play out in
the remaining 90 seconds of the episode, it was played as a punchline. It undercut the power of
Diane’s experience and triumph. It almost seemed like because they had the opportunity to write
an episode dedicated to abortion, the writers wanted to show the full experience and didn’t want
to leave any part out. Perhaps they felt an obligation to address as many issues as possible. In a
scene midway through the episode they even touch on Princess Carolyn’s jealousy over Diane’s
pregnancy. Princess Carolyn is facing infertility and her perspective represents some women
who are resentful that women are able to choose abortion while some can’t get pregnant at all.
She blurts out, “I’m sorry you’re so fertile, and in a sexually active, loving relationship, and now
you don’t want a family. I’m sure that’s really hard for you.” By the episode, Princess Carolyn
relates her support of Diane’s decision, reassuring her, “Diane, you don’t need to explain
anything to anyone.” It’s a full character portrait, and just unfortunate the writers felt compelled
to cram so much into so little time instead of spreading it out into multiple episodes. In that way,
“Brrap Brrap Pew Pew” almost feels like an old-fashioned “very special episode” of television.
Still, due to the volume of references and unabashed storytelling, it is a landmark episode on par
with “Maude’s Dilemma.”
**Family Guy**

Of all the animated comedies I observed, *Family Guy* had the most traditional jokes, designed to be silly or gross and make you laugh out loud. On that show, anything goes. Co-created by Seth MacFarlane and David Zuckerman, *Family Guy* is the one program of the five that I studied that airs on a network, FOX. It completed its 16th season in the spring of 2017 and has aired 312 episodes in that time since its debut in 1998. It’s a situation comedy based around a family, the Griffins, including their anthropomorphic dog Brian. *Family Guy* is known for frequent vaudeville-style cut-aways to scenes that don’t always even feature characters from the show; they’re simply reasons to tell jokes. This format means that it is less grounded in reality.

Though it airs on a network, the tremendous financial success of the show means that FOX has been incredibly permissive with creator Seth MacFarlane. One episode (“Brian and Stewie,” season 8, episode 17) came very close to pedophilia, depicting family dog Brian licking feces off the bottom of baby Stewie (who has a long-standing crush on Brian and enjoys it) while the two are trapped in a bank vault for the night. It is uncomfortable to watch. Yet the same network banned MacFarlane from airing an episode in 2009-2010, “Partial Terms of Endearment,” that centered around Lois Griffin’s decision to get an abortion claiming the subject is too controversial. The banned episode was later released on DVD and can now be accessed on streaming services. The only other *Family Guy* episode that didn’t make it to air was “When You Wish Upon a Weinstein,” out of concerns it could be construed as anti-Semitic.

The network never released a concrete reason for not airing the episode, saying only it “was a business decision” because it concerned a “fragile subject matter at a sensitive time” (Itzkoff, Banned Episode Has Its Day on DVD). However, by all accounts, the creator, writers and director were not given a clear explanation and left to speculate. Note that 2009-2010 wasn’t
an election year. In an interview with *The New York Times* (Itzkoff, How 'Family Guy' Tried to Talk About Abortion), MacFarlane speculated that

Part of it is just saying the word abortion. There are certain words and phrases that are, to a lot of people, comedy red zones that you just shouldn’t enter. We had a joke that was at the expense of Al-Qaeda, and certainly nothing to do with the 9/11 victims, and they were very skittish about us using the phrase World Trade Center. So there are certain words, and abortion is one of those words, that once you say them, people start getting nervous.

This is even questionable given that there are so many other references to abortion in *Family Guy* that have not been censored. There are 33 over 13 seasons, not including the 5 in the banned episode “Partial Terms of Endearment.” 20 of these took place in seasons 1-8 (season 8 aired in 2009-2010). In season 6, episode 7 (“Peter’s Daughter”) the focus of the episode is daughter Meg’s pregnancy. There are two abortion jokes, and it’s made to appear that both Peter and Lois suggest she get an abortion. Peter’s joke is coded—it’s a wink from the writers to the audience.
LOIS. Oh, I can't believe this! My baby's pregnant. How could this happen?

PETER. I don't know, but regardless of how it happened, it happened. You're pregnant Meg, and there's only one thing to do.

[Peter, holding a coat hanger, comes up from behind Meg]

Meg, could you turn over? I gotta get that thing outta there. You're sitting on my shirt. I gotta put it on this hanger. Now, I'm going to Michael's house to force him to marry you.

(season 6, episode 7, 14:18-14:48)
This allusion only works if the viewer is familiar with the history of coat hangers being used to facilitate illegal self-induced abortion, but that’s fairly well known among adults. Peter would be upset that his teenage daughter was pregnant, and using misplaced focus this way is a funny method to depict his emotions.

Meg’s mother Lois is far more direct with her. While Meg is trying on wedding dresses, after Michael has asked her to marry him, Lois tells Meg that it’s still not too late to change her mind.

MEG. Hey, what do you guys think of this one?
LOIS. Meg, are you sure you want to go through with this? You know there are other options.
MEG. Mom, I'm not getting an abortion.
LOIS. Well, I'm not saying an abortion per se— maybe you just drink and smoke a lot?
MEG. What?
LOIS. Just don't start doing it and then chicken out halfway through the pregnancy because then you wind up with Chris.

(season 6, episode 7, 16:59-17:30)

This episode may not seem like it’s significant, because it resolves when Meg gets her period (she read her pregnancy test incorrectly), and she never chose abortion to begin with. Yet it is significant that abortion was a part of the conversation and that her family would have supported her in that choice. For comparison, on Roseanne when a 19-year-old Darlene Connor became pregnant (“Another Mouth to Shut Up”), abortion was mysteriously mentioned just once and not
by name when her mother asks if she’s considered “all the options.” This was despite how unhappy all the characters are made by the situation. Darlene was the first in her family to go to college and knows the impact that having a child will have on her ambitions. Her declaration that she wants the baby more than she’s wanted anything feels completely out of character for her. It is plain that this was a plot device intended to keep Sara Gilbert on the show instead of having her character off in Chicago.

The *Family Guy* joke in “Peter’s Daughter” is really a joke about doofus brother Chris, who is consistently shown as messy, slow and gross. For all intents and purposes though, the episode was about an unintended teen pregnancy. In season 12, episode 5 (“Boopa-dee Bappa-dee”) it’s revealed that Meg has had at least one abortion. She’s asked by the U.S. Consulate for her abortion stance and replies, while getting into a squatting position, “It’s pretty much this.”

In season 6, episode 6 (“Padre de Familia”), it’s revealed that Peter’s mother Thelma went to Mexico to obtain an abortion during her pregnancy with Peter, but somehow was unable to access one. As a result, Peter was born in Mexico and is not an American citizen because she never completed the citizenship paperwork. The way she speaks about her decision is actually very lovely and realistic; she tells her son, "When I found out that your real father was a drunken Irishman, I went to Mexico to terminate my pregnancy. But god had other plans and you were born right there. You were so beautiful, and I loved you. But when I got back home, I was so afraid of being judged by the community, that I never filled out the paperwork to make you a citizen.” It’s never explained why Thelma would have gone to Mexico, as “Padre de Familia” aired in 2007 and Peter is in his early 40s, abortion would have been legal in the States and likely fairly accessible given that the show takes place in Rhode Island. Since Thelma fears ostacization from the community for wanting an abortion, it’s realistic that she would want to
travel, though Mexico becomes key to the story. The barrier also was not explained; perhaps he was premature or she was further along than she thought. In the end, it is a cartoon and things don’t always make sense. Peter doesn’t react to the revelation she had attempted to obtain an abortion, only that he is “an illegal Mexican immigrant.”

In “Tom Tucker: The Man and His Dream,” character Lindsey, Chris’s girlfriend, reveals that she has had abortions as well, though she’s not presented as a role model. Chris breaks up with her when he discovers that she’s been cheating on him.

LOIS. Oh, hi, you two. You know Lindsey, I just want to say how nice it is to have such a beautiful young woman in our home.

LINDSEY. [Notices Stewie.] Oh, a baby. I almost had one of you twice.

LOIS. [Laughs.] Who didn't, right?! So, what are you two up to tonight?

(season 10, episode 13, 9:41-10:06)

As Lindsey is presented as a slut, unfortunately this may be taken by some as the stereotype that abortions are used by promiscuous women. I think the key, though, is that Lois’s line, “Who didn’t, right?” is very intentional. Part of the joke of Lindsey’s character is that she looks exactly like Lois, so it appears Chris is dating his mother. Chris chooses Lindsey because he mistakenly believes that she’ll be very accepting of him, just as Lois is very accepting of Peter’s flaws, and Chris feels that only a woman like his mother could ever love someone with his flaws. The “Who didn’t, right?” line is both intended to be a subversive joke (Lois is a bit of a rebel) and to underscore how much alike the two women really are.

Then there’s a totally different character named Lindsay (with an “a”), who appears earlier in the season, a character created just for the following joke in “Stewie Goes for a Drive”. A cut-away sets up a game show similar to The Price is Right. I think this is one of Family Guy’s
best jokes. It’s so understated and a great example of abortion humor around everyday stresses and disappointments patients have to put up with.

Figure 5: “Stewie Goes for a Drive.” *Family Guy*, season 10, episode 4, FOX, 6 Nov 2011, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/5b32edd1-d477-4cd1-910d-0b25676191e9. (00:11:56).

ANNOUNCER. Lindsay, your showcase is all about relaxation. And what better place to relax than in your brand new hammock! This sturdy and portable hammock from Swingway turns any patio into a tropical paradise. And you can entertain yourself on your patio by drawing with chalk! Yes, Pratt & Millwood 8-color pastel chalk will turn any patio into a tropical art studio. But you'll have to pack your chalk, because you're going to be staying 6 days and 7 nights at your parents' house in Wilmington, Delaware!

LINDSAY. I moved my abortion for this.
Unsurprisingly, FOX had no reported objections to any of these characters’ abortions, nor when Lois discussed choosing the procedure in other episodes.

The previous season’s “And I’m Joyce Kilmer” (season 9, episode 9) shows Lois and reporter Joyce bonding over dinner. Joyce asks Lois to share a crazy story about herself. At first hesitant, Lois leans in conspiratorially and reveals “Well… I have had an abortion.” Joyce snores and responds “Oh, wake me up when you’ve got something good.” Both approach the procedure casually. An earlier reference is also not storyline driven, and its presence is solely for the purpose of a joke. Saying the word “abortion” heightens the ridiculousness of the story because of its shock value in a cut-away in “Stewie Kills Lois”:

LOIS. Peter, stop picking your teeth, we're at the Captain's table.

CAPTAIN. And that was the first time I saw the northern lights at their peak. And as I gazed, astonished, at their lustrous brilliance, I turned to my first mate and I said, we are looking into the very eyes of god.

LOIS. Ah, what a wonderful story.

PETER. I got one for you. So me and Lois are driving up to Vermont to get this abortion...

LOIS. Peter!

PETER. Eh, hang on, hang on Lois, don't ruin it. All right, so we're driving up to get this abortion, and we get to the abortion clinic, and the abortionist has one hand.

LOIS. Peter, for god's—

PETER. Beh, beh, beh, beh, beh, I'll tell it, I'll tell it. So I turn to Lois and I says,
you want to get an abortion here? You want to get an abortion with the abortionist having a stump hand? We can't get an abortion here. So we turned around and went home, and two and a half months later our daughter Meg was born.

(season 6, episode 4, 6:06-7:01)

Here, Peter, the boor, is not just telling a private story to strangers, he keeps raising the stakes by repeating this taboo word. Following the rule of 3s in comedy, he tells the story in three parts over Lois’s objections, adding more inappropriate details each time. It’s unclear what to make of the abortionist’s stump hand…is he supposed to be unqualified? Does he represent a botched abortion? The final absurd detail is Peter’s revelation that “two and a half months later our daughter Meg was born,” which would have put Lois’s pregnancy in the third trimester when she sought out the abortion. The story is unlikely, though it’s a well-crafted joke.

There are some ongoing problems with consent in Family Guy. In “Farmer Guy” (season 11, episode 20), Peter is shown pushing Lois, asleep in bed, into Planned Parenthood and asking for their “quietest doctor.”

Another problematic territory for Family Guy writers is miscarriage and self-induced abortion jokes. In “Peter’s Progress,” Peter learns about his past life in the 17th century, founding the town of Quahog.

QUAGMIRE. Boy, everything's shaping up real nice!

PETER. Yeah, and we finally finished the town abortion clinic.

[Sign: Ye Olde Abortion Clinic. A set of wooden stairs that leads to nowhere. A visibly pregnant woman ascends and jumps off, falling on her stomach. Another woman follows; there is a line.]
Of all episodes (and this was the season finale) to include a joke about abortion, the writers chose to have one here, in an episode set in the 1600s. Moreover, there is a line. There’s shock value in seeing something so private so openly depicted. It also acknowledges that demand for abortion did exist even back then, though of course it was not performed like that. The women are ok after they jump (and no longer visibly pregnant); they get up, pay the fee and walk away.

A similar set-up appears the following season in “Dial Meg for Murder”:
JOURNALIST. This is a disgusting display.

BRIAN. Boy, you can say that again. Nothing like a bunch of adult men teasing animals for fun. It's amazing that this is still legal. The only reason I'm here is because my idiot friend is in the rodeo.

JOURNALIST. I only came because I'm writing a magazine article. One of the competitors is a 13-year-old female riding prodigy. Apparently she got on the bull to miscarry and found out she had a talent for it.

(season 8, episode 11, 4:15-4:37)

In another episode, “Brian’s a Bad Father” (season 12, episode 11), Brian becomes a writer on a pre-teen TV show, and to heighten the drama, he writes inappropriate dialogue, like having one character “give herself an abdomen punch abortion.” For context, Brian also has a teen say that he wants to put a gun in his mouth because his parents want him to wear a bike helmet. On the one hand, self-induced abortion is real and there are many reasons, including stigma and lack of access to medical and surgical abortion, that people attempt it. The *Family Guy* jokes are both about 13 year olds who don’t want to be pregnant, which is not unrealistic. I won’t claim that there’s no place for self-abortion jokes but there are problems with confusing miscarriage and abortion. It blurs the line between medical and surgical abortion as a safe, healthy and normal medical procedure and induced abortion that can be unsafe and painful. We also have to question what’s happening culturally around the word self-abortion when miscarriage becomes a euphemism. It also could be upsetting to those who miscarry and are met with their own stigma; the two terms are different and shouldn’t be mixed up. Still, even with this issue, these two jokes on their own are significant because they don’t denigrate women or the decision to choose abortion.
Another problematic type of joke occurs in season 12, episode 10 (“Grimm Job”), when the show parodies fairy tales and Lois, as Cinderella, gets to ask her fairy godmother to use her magic. Lois cries “Oh my god! I want that bitch Snow White to just admit she had an abortion.” It’s a joke that uses stigma to try to get a laugh, which isn’t positive, though Lois appears more put off by Snow White’s lying than her having had an abortion.

In “Boys Do Cry” (season 5, episode 15) Chris expresses surprise at the number of abortions another character has had and declares she’s been “scraped more times than a fisherman’s knuckle. The person he’s referring to is Laura Bush, who “kept all these Planned Parenthood receipts.” With George W. Bush appearing as a minor character in the episode, I suspect though either that this was a misunderstanding about the Bush family’s relationship with Planned Parenthood or poor execution of a more sophisticated joke. On the other hand, it may be mocking the Bush family’s hypocrisy. In their book “Strange Justice: The Selling of Clarence Thomas,” Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson reveal “As a young Texas congressman Bush had been such an avid member of Planned Parenthood that he was nicknamed ‘Rubbers’ (17).” Before the GOP moved further to the right in the 1980s, multiple generations of politicians in the Bush family were involved in helping to secure federal funds for Planned Parenthood. In fact, Bush’s grandfather Prescott Bush served as treasurer of Planned Parenthood, then known as the American Birth Control League, in 1947, and led their national fundraising campaign (Levy). As a Congressman from Connecticut in the 1950s (1952-1963), he led the push for federal funding for family planning, which was a particularly brave stance considering that birth control was not yet legal, or legal to advertise, in all states, as Griswold v. Connecticut wasn’t until 1965. Sadly, for the sake of politics, this support took a sharp turn in the other direction at the expense of
reproductive health, including when George W. Bush (“Rubbers”) reinstated the harmful global
gag rule on his first working day in office.

A joke in season 11’s “Chris Cross” at first appears to be in this same vein (playing on stigma), but is actually more complex. Meg tortures Chris by making him do anything she asks after she catches him trying to steal money from Lois’s purse to buy new sneakers. Her demands are awful.

CHRIS. Ok, Meg. I stood outside Planned Parenthood for 36 hours, and here are the pictures of every girl in your class who went in. [Gives Meg four photos.]
MEG. All right, good. Now I want you to call them as if you're their dead baby.
CHRIS. No way. That was the last thing on your list, I can't do this anymore.
(season 11, episode 13, 11:30-12:34)

Meg next admits she’s part of a group that trashes Anne Frank’s house every year. In doing this, the show recognizes how terrible her demands are and brands Meg’s behavior as abhorrent.

Chris chooses to run away rather than comply. What Meg asked Chris to do outside Planned Parenthood was behave like an anti-choice protester, who photograph and videotape patients and copy license plate numbers of their cars as a harassment tactic. Undoubtedly, some viewers will recognize this and make the connection.

It’s unlikely that Meg’s bullying to-do list in “Chris Cross” was something the writers just made up rather than pulled from a news article. The show often makes fun of people who don’t understand how abortion works. The very first Family Guy joke is an abortion joke so specific that it would be tough to replicate. It occurs towards the end of the final episode of season 1 (“Brian: Portrait of a Dog”):
PETER. Quiet, Lois. *Murder She Wrote.*

JESSICA. Charles Montrose, after all these years.

CHARLES. Jessica Fletcher. Why I...I haven't seen you since you had

the..the...uh..."

JESSICA. You can say it Charles. I'm not ashamed. Abortion.

PETER. 'Ah-ha! So she's the murderer!

(season 1, episode 7, 21:11-21:32)

It’s hard to criticize because it’s a great set-up and the punchline is that Peter is an idiot. It pokes fun at those who are anti-choice and equate abortion with murder, calling patients murderers. Plus, Jessica Fletcher is unabashed about her decision, which is positive. There’s a similar joke in season 7 (“Tales of a Third Grade Nothing”) when Peter repeats third grade.

TEACHER. Good morning class. Starting today we have a new student. Peter, would you like to introduce yourself?

PETER. Hi, my name's Peter Griffin. I was actually in third grade a long time ago, but I never finished. Back then we had a teacher named Mrs. Wilson, except, except, we had this funny little nickname for her. We called her Mrs. Killson, because she had an abortion. I know, I know, it's kinda silly, but we were, you know, just a buncha kids. I'm sorry, go ahead, Mrs, uh?

TEACHER. Wilson. Thank you Peter. Why don't you sit over there, next to Omar?"

(season 7, episode 6, 7:56-8:30)

Once again, the punchline is Peter’s stupidity (and lack of manners). Peter is sometimes depicted as being anti-abortion, but more often functions as a stand-in for those who would spout an
ideology without fully understanding the issues. I don’t think it’s a stretch to think that the writers are perhaps comparing those who would call women baby killers to “just a buncha kids” who aren’t aware of the issues involved. In perhaps the most on the nose instance of this, in season 5’s “Airport ‘07”, Peter decides to become a redneck after seeing a redneck comedy show and buys a pick-up truck.

PETER. Hey Brian! Check it out!

[Rear window of pick-up truck has been spray painted with American flag with depiction of fetus in the middle. On the bottom in a yellow box are the words "SUPPORT OUR TROOPS AND FETUSES."]

BRIAN. Peter, you painted over the back window. Isn't that dangerous?

PETER. I'm a redneck Brian. We like people driving behind us to know what our beliefs are.

[Crashes truck.]

(season 5, episode 12, 3:43-4:00)

In “Quagmire’s Baby” (season 8, episode 6), Peter twice confuses abortion with adoption, and even refers to Roe v. Wade as Wade v. Boggs. When Lois is yelling at him in “The Tan Aquatic” (season 5, episode 11), he yells back with “Well, maybe you shoulda just had an abortion Lois. Would that make you happy? If I was never born?” “What?!” asks Lois.

A parody of the song “The Company Way” from How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying lampoons Republicans in “Excellence in Broadcasting” (season 9, episode 2), and includes an image of two pregnant women being burned at the stake because “They’ve outlawed all abortions, late or early. It’s a sin we can’t abide.” In the song, Lois asks, “What if you find a fetus, left abandoned?” and Rush Limbaugh sings back “We just take it, and we jam it back
inside!” Another example of this type of joke occurs in “Love Blactually” (season 7), when Brian is introduced to a potential date, Jane:

LOIS. Jane, this is Brian.

JANE. Oh, Brian! Lois has told me so much about you. Wow, you're even more handsome than she said.

BRIAN. Hey, thanks. So, uh, that's a great costume. What are you, one of Freddy Krueger's victims?

JANE. I'm a victim of the liberal agenda. I'm a murdered fetus. Did you know that Democrats murder thousands of babies every year, and sometimes babies are put back into the womb just so that they can be aborted again?

BRIAN. Have you ever had any sex that was voluntary?

JANE. No, I have not.

BRIAN. Yeah, have a good evening. Come on, buddy, let's go.

[gestures to Woodstock to follow him]

WOODSTOCK. [unintelligible]

BRIAN. Yep, with a capital 'C'.

(season 7, episode 1, 2:42-3:16)

Both Brian’s question and Jane’s rejoinder are very odd, and makes you feel for Jane. I suspect that the writers were trying to communicate another intention (about her enjoyment of sex) and did not phrase it well. Brian is often presented as the liberal voice of reason on the show, though he is deservedly the butt of jokes when he goes overboard. Later in the episode Stewie chides his taste in women, comforting him by promising “I’m sure one day you’ll meet a girl who loves abortion as much as you do.”
In “Friends Without Benefits” (season 11, episode 7), Brian comforts Meg, who’s distraught over a relationship that didn’t work out, by telling her she’ll meet the right guy someday. “All it takes is one guy, makin' one mistake one drunken night. Sperm finding a fertile egg. You refusing to do what a sane woman would do. You've got him, Meg. You're got him for life." As Meg is nearly always the butt of jokes on Family Guy, the implication is that the audience is supposed to side with Brian and agree that the sane thing for a woman to do in that situation would be to have an abortion.

The writers appear to love shocking the audience by using the word abortion (which is an interesting cultural statement- that a word alone can be so impactful). As MacFarlane observed in his New York Times interview, the word is powerful, and the writers have used that to their advantage. Using the word is beneficial because it normalizes it. Even when the jokes aren’t perfect, it still helps diminish the taboos and fear around saying the word out loud. This forms the backbone of two specific jokes in the series. In “Let’s Go to the Hop” (season 2, episode 14), Stewie insults Lois’s banana pudding, calling it “another one of your wretched culinary abortions.” In “Play It Again Brian” (season 6, episode 10), Brian suggests renting the movie Vanilla Sky. Lois retorts, “I said a bad movie, not an abortion.”

There are some straightforward references to abortion and Planned Parenthood designed to get laughs. This was a cut-away in “I Take Thee, Quagmire” (season 4):

BRIAN. So, how's the weaning going?

STEWIE. Oh, it's horrible. Giving up breast milk is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I bet the founding fathers had an easier time writing the Bill of Rights.

FIRST FOUNDING FATHER. All right, we're done.

SECOND FOUNDING FATHER. You think the language in the second
amendment is clear enough? You know, about the right to bear arms.

THIRD FOUNDING FATHER. Of course it's clear. Every American has the right to hang a pair of bear arms on their wall. How could that possibly be misconstrued?

FIRST FOUNDING FATHER. All right, fantastic then. Wait, you know what? Before we send this to the printer, let's take that abortion thing out.

(season 4, episode 21, 10:09-10:39)

This is the kind-of joke that when people claim that abortion can't be funny is a very basic joke to be able to use as a reference. Then there are a couple of references to Planned Parenthood. The first is very positive, which while the organization is under constant attack should not be undersold, featured in a cut-away in season 5’s “The Tan Aquatic”:

LOIS. Stewie, what is that on your lip?

STEWIE. Eh, I drew a pencil moustache. I like it 'cause it's just above my lip. The kind of moustache that says 'yeah, I've been nude on camera, what of it?'

LOIS. C'mere, I'll take care of that, sweetie.

[Lois removes his moustache with her spit.]

STEWIE. Agh, ugh- it's got spit all over it. Now I know what it feels like to have dinner with Martin Landau.

MARTIN LANDAU [spitting]: What people forget about Polanski is, Polanski wasn't a perfectionist, and pedophile or not, he was a perfectly professional person. And punctual.

STEWIE. Yeah, maybe we could talk about something else?

MARTIN LANDAU. You know, my wife and I are very involved in Planned
Parenthood, which provides possibilities for people who are underprivileged.

STEWIE. Maybe chew your food a little, champ.

(season 5, episode 11, 6:56-7:44)

There’s a visual reference in “Padre de Familia” to “Mexican Planned Parenthood” (with a sign that says “Yo quiero you unwanted baby!”), but the next spoken reference about Planned Parenthood is a joke in “The Big Bang Theory” (season 9). Brian teases Stewie by refusing to tell him a joke until after Stewie has done something for him. Finally, Brian agrees to share it.

Figure 7: “The Big Bang Theory.” *Family Guy*, season 9, episode 16, FOX, 8 May 2011, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/0665ea00-3167-4a2f-9097-8b6bae55757a. (00:07:37).

BRIAN. Oh, it's nothing, really. It's just this bit about a Planned Parenthood clinic on Halloween.

JACK SPARROW. Next.
(season 9, episode 16, 6:35-7:37)

Clearly, the visual is the whole joke, and the knowledge that it’s Halloween softens the discomfort. (There is something disheartening about all these shows only depicting men as doctors though!)

“Lottery Fever” (season 10, episode 1) inserts an allusion to an unnamed abortion clinic in the opening theme song, reworked for a gag. In it, one of the background dancers stops what she’s doing and approaches Peter to tell him that she’s pregnant (with his child). He offers her “a ride to the place.” It’s notable that this was placed in the season premiere episode. *Family Guy* doesn’t do a cold open (a teaser before the credits) so this is the very first new material of the season that viewers would encounter. It’s also only the second time that the opening theme song had been reworked to include a joke, so there’s the added element of surprise.

The final type of *Family Guy* joke revolves around male pregnancy. There are a couple. The first incidence involves Peter. It’s not a part of the storyline so doesn’t need to be resolved, but it’s also a madcap joke and implies that Peter isn’t really pregnant. It takes place in season 2, (“I am Peter, Hear me Roar”):

PETER. Oh, beans- I can't get this spit curl to—Lois, what, what day is it?

LOIS. Thursday.

PETER. Oh my god, oh my god. I'm late.

LOIS. If you spent less time fixing your hair.

PETER. No, Lois, I'm late late. Do we still have that pregnancy test?

LOIS. Are you insane? You can't have a baby.

PETER. Well, I don't have a lot of options- I'm Catholic. God, I thought you'd be happy.
That’s the entirety of Peter’s pregnancy scare. In the episode “Stewie is Enceinte” (season 13), Stewie becomes pregnant on purpose with Brian’s baby without his consent in an attempt to get closer with him. The title is a reference to the classic episode of *I Love Lucy*, “Lucy is Enceinte,” where Lucy attempts to tell her husband Ricky that they’re expecting. CBS would not allow her to use the word “pregnant.” Unlike Ricky, Brian is not pleased at the news; he’s horrified and embarrassed, not least because Stewie is underage. The title is perhaps also a reference to CBS’s censorship in that Stewie’s condition is likewise unspeakable. Brian is direct with Stewie:

BRIAN. Stewie, you have to get rid of it.

STEWIE. Get rid of it? You know, why don't you just say it. Say the word Brian.

I want to hear you say it.

BRIAN. Abortion. Abortion. You need to get a big fat abortion right this second.

STEWIE. You can't even say it.

BRIAN. I think I'm gonna throw up.

STEWIE. Save the cheap theatrics, this isn't one of your crappy short stories. This is real life, Mister. So man up.

BRIAN. You are getting an abortion, Stewie.

STEWIE. I will not. Our child is growing inside me.

Stewie only hears what he wants to. Brian goes on to hit Stewie in the stomach, but they reconcile. For all intents and purposes, abortion appears to be the rational decision, driven home when Brian keeps pointing out as they’re shopping for baby things that all of the items could be used by Stewie. It is an episode that shows how not all pregnancies are welcome and romantic.
Eventually, Stewie gives birth to a litter of puppies with disabilities and developmental problems that they are not equipped to take care of. They wind up neglecting and abandoning them when they realize that they just want to hang out together and aren’t attached to the puppies.

The banned episode “Partial Terms of Endearment” is unusual in that its plot is more linear than many typical Family Guy episodes. There are still frequent cut-aways, but, perhaps because there is so much ground to cover, it spends most of the episode on one storyline, instead of multiple storylines as it usually does. Once again, Peter’s lack of critical thinking skills figures prominently. Lois has agreed to be the surrogate mother for a friend, who soon after dies in a car accident with her husband. Now facing an unwanted pregnancy and unaffordable associated bills, she decides to have an abortion. Peter is initially supportive but manipulated by anti-choice protesters in the clinic parking lot. Newly emboldened, he drags Lois home and convinces her to have the baby. When Lois points out the changes that will be needed to their lifestyle (“I mean, sure, having a baby costs a fortune. There’s cutbacks on things we love. There’s diapers and crying and late nights with no sleep. Flu shots and mumps and driver’s ed and tuition…”), Peter abruptly reveals “We had the abortion” before it cuts to the credits.

The episode is credited to writer Danny Smith and director Joseph Lee. Perhaps because it appears to have lacked a woman’s perspective, this episode is very different from BoJack Horseman’s “Brrap Brrap Pew Pew.” For one, it’s mostly told through Peter’s perspective. There are some contradictions for the sake of humor. Though the clinic doctor (again, male) eventually tells Peter “It’s a very simple, safe procedure in which we very precisely and delicately remove the embryo. We do it all the time and I promise it’s virtually risk-free,” in preceding dialogue, Peter expresses concern that he’ll go “hacking at her like Sweeney Todd.” The doctor replies “No, no, good Lord, this is not 2005. We’ve come a long way since then.” Of course, this is
parody. Yet, one imagines a more skilled comic making a different joke. I was also disappointed by the doctor’s further dialogue of “Let’s keep abortion safe, legal and rare.” Though this is a saying associate with the pro-choice movement, this is often misinterpreted and I wonder if this was inserted by those working on the episode who weren’t wholly familiar with the issues? That saying originated during the Clinton administration as a concession and the issue is with “rare.” That implies a moral judgment on a safe procedure that is necessary for a variety of reasons independent of a set limit or quota. Often the emphasis is on reducing abortions directly rather than addressing conditions, such as lack of access to contraception and rape culture, that lead to a need for the procedure. As such, many feminists feel strongly that “rare” is harmful. Similarly, the title “Partial Terms of Endearment” is a reference to the film Terms of Endearment, a classic film that follows a relationship between a mother and daughter in which the daughter dies at the end. The word “partial” refers to the phrase “partial birth abortion,” which is not a recognized medical term. This wasn’t a timely satirical reference, as so-called “partial birth abortion” was banned in the U.S. in 2003 and there continues to be a great deal of misinformation around the intact dilation and extraction procedure. Unfortunately, this is one of those references that is not particularly educational or helpful.

The rest of the episode, similar to others in the series, parodies the anti-choice movement by using hyperbolic statements (such as claiming “the guy who would have killed Hitler,” “the fourth Stooge” and “Osama Bin Laden’s America-loving older brother” were aborted) and Peter’s ignorance (equating masturbation to abortion). All-in-all, it appears the only difference between this and other episodes of Family Guy that mention abortion are that “Partial Terms of Endearment” devoted an entire episode to the topic and it is much more pointed in its critique of the anti-choice movement. Given all the other references in the series, one can only conclude that
FOX censored “Partial Terms of Endearment” not because it was concerned about the word “abortion” but because it wasn’t comfortable with so many jokes directed at anti-choice activists.

**Rick and Morty**

The third season of *Rick and Morty* set ratings records for Adult Swim (Cartoon Network’s late night programming block), where it has aired on since its beginnings in 2013. Its sardonic wit has earned it a lot of fans, including celebrities Elon Musk and Kanye West. The show has run for three seasons thus far and a total of 32 episodes; recently a deal was signed to take it through its tenth season.

At its heart, *Rick and Morty* is a family drama crossed with a sitcom. Inspired by *Back to the Future*, *Rick and Morty* was co-created by Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland. The plot centers around galactic outlaw and nihilistic genius scientist Rick, who has returned to live with his daughter Beth after being absent since her childhood. Beth is married to perpetual helpless loser Jerry, and they have two children, Morty and Summer. Rick takes Morty (and occasionally his sister) on adventures around the galaxy, while Beth attempts to manage her insecurities around her own intellect and fears that Rick will leave and abandon her once more. Rick hates Jerry, and that is constantly causing problems in his daughter’s marriage. Episodes are often more emotionally impactful in their grim depiction of reality and their characters’ inner turmoil than the fantastic galaxies and creatures dreamed up by the creative team.

There are four abortion references in *Rick and Morty*, three of which occur in the first season episode “Rixty Minutes” (episode 8). The fourth is spoken by a minor character in the second season premiere “A Rickle in Time.” Beth and Jerry are “living it up in some pointless, grounded story about their shitty marriage” when Jerry accidentally hits a deer with his car.
Convinced she can save it, Beth, a horse surgeon by trade, convinces Jerry to bring it to a vet so she can perform emergency surgery. They’re followed by a hunter who claims the deer as his property, revealing that he shot the deer before Jerry hit it. The vet tries to calm things down, saying “Look, I don’t know what the law says about this, but I took an oath that I would let no animal come to harm. Except when sterilizing, aborting or euthanizing them, or also when eating them at almost any meal.” It’s not a great line; it just doesn’t make a lot of sense, as sterilizing animals is widely viewed as protective. It’s likely that the writers felt they needed to tee up the “eating them” punchline. Viewed in a certain light, this could be positive because I for one was not aware until I viewed this episode and googled the question that abortions could be performed on animals, and that was educational. Viewed in a negative light, this representation could be reinforcement of the view that abortion is harmful. However, this is also animal-specific.

Figure 8: “Rixty Minutes.” *Rick and Morty*, season 1, episode 8, Cartoon Network, 17 Mar 2014, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/e0b6c38f-5629-424e-8244-eded87dddf70. (00:08:06).
“Rixty Minutes” is the first season episode credited to writers Justin Roiland and Tom Kauffman and director Bryan Newton. In it, the family is watching TV and bored by what they find. Rick installs an inter-dimensional cable box through which they are able to access various, more interesting shows broadcast across the multiverse. On one channel, they see Jerry being interviewed on the David Letterman show and learn in another dimension, he’s become a famous actor. Rick accommodates Jerry, Beth and Summer, who want to learn more, by sharing his interdimensional googles, which they can wear to learn more about what their lives are like in different dimensions while they’re wearing them. Summer is perplexed that when she sees other versions of herself the family is playing boring games like Yahtzee or Chutes and Ladders, but her parents discover other versions of themselves that are wildly successful and childless. Like in BoJack Horseman, Summer learns that she was the result of an unplanned pregnancy and overhears her parents discuss having considered abortion.

BETH. When two people create a life together, they set aside their previous lives as individuals.

JERRY. Give me a break. We're not heroes for having unprotected sex on prom night.

BETH. Oh, I get it. Now that you know you could have had it better, you resent me for holding you back.

JERRY. Well, now that we know you think the tables are turning, we know you thought there were unturned tables!

BETH. What are you talking about?

JERRY. All this time you've been thinking, what if that loser Jerry hadn't talked me out of the abortion? Well now you know, you'd be a doctor. Whoop de doo.
You'd also be drinking wine, alone in a house full of exotic birds and I'd be on DeCaprio's yacht, banging Kristen Stewart!

SUMMER. You thought about getting an abortion?

BETH. Everyone thinks about it, obviously, I'm the version of me that didn't do it, so, you're welcome.

JERRY. Yeah, you're welcome.

SUMMER. Yeah, thank you guys so much. It's a real treat to be raised by parents that forced themselves to be together instead of being happy!

RICK. Hey, do we have any wafer cookies? Mmmmm. Ooh, boy, looks like you guys have been checking out alternate lives and realizing you don't have it as good, huh? That's too bad. You know, me and Morty are having a blast. We just discovered a show called Ball Fondlers. I mean, I don't want to rub it in or anything, but you guys clearly backed the wrong conceptual horse.

(season 1, episode 8, 7:31-8:40)

There’s a lot going on here, but it feels very realistic, which is what one would hope a good representation of a topic would be like. Beth and Jerry aren’t just talking about abortion, they’re talking about their relationship, and it’s very true to character in the inherent snark of Beth’s comment. It’s also nearly universally true that almost everyone faced with an unplanned pregnancy considers abortion (even if they reject it) because it exists. It’s not wrong to acknowledge that and honest that Beth does. Both Beth and Jerry participate in the “You’re welcome” exchange, putting them on equal footing; the writers aren’t using abortion to villainize Beth.
When Beth and Jerry are alone, they ruminate on the different paths of their interdimensional selves and current state of their marriage.

BETH. Did you really talk me out of the abortion?

JERRY. Well, we blew a tire on the way to the clinic.

BETH. I think in my head I was doing it all for the kids. And now the first kid is going to do something with turquoise.

JERRY. Which is either code for crystal meth, or a gateway to it.

BETH. So we didn't do the kids any favors. So we should stay together for each other and ourselves...or...

JERRY. Or?

(season 1, episode 8, 13:00-13:26)

Beth and Jerry appeared to have no moral qualms about abortion. “Blew a tire” is consistent with Jerry’s ineffectual personality. It’s pretty funny and in character, if you are familiar with the show. The final joke is balanced conceptually. Alternate-universe Jerry is a movie star, but it’s revealed he’s also addicted to cocaine and in a relationship with Kristen Stewart (presented as a bad thing). Throughout numerous episodes, it’s shown that he and Beth, though seemingly toxic together, are also symbiotic. Here, too, they can’t stay away from each other. The family watches as a naked, stumbling Jerry walks up to Beth’s home on the television.

JERRY. Where the hell am I going?

RICK. What’re you asking me for, Jerry? I’m sitting here, trying to figure out why the cops don't just take you out. They got a clear shot to your head. I can't believe our tax dollars paid for this.

BETH. Jerry? Jerry Smith?
JERRY. Beth Sanchez, I have been in love with you since high school. I hate acting, I hate cocaine, and I hate Kristen Stewart. I wish you hadn't gotten that abortion and I've never stopped thinking about what might have been.

RICK. Hey, Ball Fondlers? Huh? Ball Fondlers?

SUMMER. Yeah! I could go for some Ball Fondlers.

MORTY. Yeah, Ball Fondlers!

(season 1, episode 8, 19:45-20:58)

Earlier in the episode, Morty has calmed down an upset Summer, who had been planning to run away, by explaining that “Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody is going to die.” That explains Summer’s reaction in this scene and is a key component. She’s accepted her parents’ choice in the alternate dimension and realized that she needs to focus on herself in the present time and universe, not something that might have been. It’s a great, though nihilistic, message.

Beth and Jerry have justified their marriage as staying together for the kids when really they’re attracted to each other and each have their own problems opening up and admitting that. Abortion is a means to tell this story of their inevitability as a couple, as much as Rick hates them together.

South Park

South Park has also been subject to censorship from Comedy Central in the form of a banned episode, though not for abortion content. The network prohibited the show from airing an episode in which the prophet Mohammed was depicted, out of concern for the creators’ safety. The differences between these two banned episodes speaks to the different levels of freedom that
creators enjoy on cable versus on networks. Comedy Central also recognizes that controversy is good for its brand.

*South Park* is not a liberal or a conservative show, though because it has taken aim at virtually everyone and everything, people on both sides have claimed it has a bent one way or the other. Trey Parker and Matt Stone would likely not love someone interpreting their work as pro-choice; it’s more that free speech is really important to them. They described their philosophy on a panel convened by *Reason* (a libertarian magazine) in Amsterdam in August 2006 (Gillespie and Walker):

PARKER. This last year has been a really amazing year. We've suddenly found ourselves back in the headlines again because of the shows we were doing. It wasn't an intentional thing. It was just that we've reached that level now where we're very comfortable saying, "You know what? We're done. We've made all the money we need, and we both have always had dreams of doing other things." As soon as they say, "We're not going to let you do a Muhammad episode," we can say, "All right, well, we're not going to do any more shows for you this season."

STONE. They were really bummed out when we called them and said we're going to do a Muhammad episode. They're like, "Ahh, fuck. Oh my God, you guys." Because they can't tell us no. A smaller show, they would've just said, "No, you can't do it. End of story." And a bigger show like *The Simpsons* wouldn't dare risk their franchise. It's such a stupid political move, but we're just stupid enough to do it.
This doesn’t lessen the value of their contribution. After season 3, the writers determinedly created episodes with social commentary. The show depicts four foul-mouthed and precocious third graders (who later graduate to fourth grade)—Kyle, Stan, Kenny and Cartman—and their family and friends who live in the semi-rural town of South Park, Colorado. It debuted on Comedy Central on August 13, 1997 and quickly became the network’s most popular show. *South Park* was co-created by Trey Parker, Matt Stone and Brian Graden (it is executive produced by Anne Garefino, who has worked on the series since its inception) and recently completed its 22nd season. 318 episodes have aired, and Comedy Central has committed to 23 seasons, though certainly they would like more.

There are 27 references to abortion in *South Park* (28 if you count “Reproductive Rights” written on the blackboard in “Lil’ Crime Stoppers” (season 7, episode 6) under “Women’s Liberation of the 1960s (The Sexual Revolution)” in Garrison’s classroom).

Like *Family Guy*, the jokes run the gamut, from people who don’t understand abortion to using the word for shock value as a laugh. In an early episode, “Cartman’s Mom is Still a Dirty Slut” (season 2, episode 2), Cartman’s mother confuses abortion with adoption in a quest to try and avoid revealing her son’s father (a joke you may recognize from *Family Guy*, though *South Park* did it first). She sleeps with a congressman, the governor and finally President Bill Clinton in an attempt to legalize late-term abortion before she realizes her error and decides to just tell her son the truth.

The next time *South Park* deals with abortion comes in a very significant social commentary episode in season 5, episode 13. “Kenny Dies,” which aired on December 5, 2001, was a response to President George W. Bush’s ban on stem cell research in August of that year. Stem cells are supplied from the donated tissue of aborted embryos and used in medical research.
Anti-choice activists are opposed to stem cell research both because abortion is involved and because it involves human embryos. Just as the abortion debate often shifts the focus from women’s health, the stem cell debate tended to focus on abortion and not the ill and disabled who would benefit from advances in science. “Kenny Dies,” in addition to being straightforward about where these stem cells originated, made sure that the ill were not forgotten by giving a main character a muscular disease that could potentially be cured with stem cells, and killing the character off. The impact was not fully felt until the following season. Where Kenny typically was resurrected each episode, for the very first time, after “Kenny Dies,” Kenny didn’t return for an entire season, until the last moments of the final episode of season 6 (“Red Sleigh Down”). When Kyle is told that his friend Kenny is dying, he sobs, “Kenny can’t die, Kenny can’t die.” The line is meant to be funny, because it’s always been true. Little do viewers know how poignant this will become. Due to repeat viewing habits, it will take on this sincere meaning the next time they watch, and become funny because the viewer will be in on the joke (that Kenny can die).
Cartman is the main protagonist in “Kenny Dies.” It opens in an Unplanned Parenthood clinic. The writers rely on misplaced focus and defy expectations first by setting the scene to a laugh track, which is revealed to be the laugh track to a comedy playing on a TV set.

[Open on Unplanned Parenthood] [Laugh track, like a sitcom]

DOCTOR. All right, Ms. Sanders. All ready for your abortion?

MS. SANDERS. Ready as I'm ever going to be, I guess.

DOCTOR. Well, try to relax. It will all be over very soon.

MS. SANDERS. Doctor, can we turn off that television?

DOCTOR. Oh, yes, I’m sorry. Now, there is one more thing.

MS. SANDERS. What?
DOCTOR. Have you heard of stem cell research?

MS. SANDERS. Oh, I've heard of it on the news, but I don't know what it is.

DOCTOR. Well, basically a lot of amazing studies have shown that stem cells might be used to fight cancer, and a myriad of other diseases. Right now a lot of stem cells come from the tissue of aborted fetuses. I'm sorry, unwanted children. And if you sign a release, that tissue can go to study.

MS. SANDERS. Oh, well, I suppose we could help others.

DOCTOR. The hope is that someday it might.

MS. SANDERS. Okay.

DOCTOR. Great. Well, here we go.

[Sound of vacuum. Then, facilities man crosses screen pushing a vacuum.]

DOCTOR. [holding tray] Nurse, this is to go to Alder's Labs, for the stem cell research.

NURSE. Yes, doctor.

[Nurse enters employee lounge and places cells into a biohazard container. Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" begins playing, as shot of truck from Alder Research Group backing up to building.

TRUCK DRIVER. [singing] Goin' places that I've never been. Seein' things that I may never see again.

[Deer jumps out in front of truck]

Jesus Christ!

[Truck skids off road, down mountain. Cartman appears, riding his tricycle on mountain bend.]
CARTMAN. [singing Sheena Easton's "Morning Train"] My baby takes the morning train, he works from nine 'til five and then... [Spies overturned truck.]

Hmmm. What do we have here?

(season 5, episode 13, 0:35-2:42)

The subtle satire is that the truck driver has just been violently killed in a massive explosion, but the focus, as in life, is on the stem cells. The doctor, again male, is very professional and calm, treating his patient with respect and not coercing her to sign. The information that he gives her about stem cells is accurate. The patient comes across as compassionate for agreeing to the donation, particularly when contrasted with Cartman. For the viewer, the boldness of seeing a depiction of a patient about to undergo an abortion procedure may be shocking, and to break the tension, the writers and director use the sound cues to disorient viewers by subverting their expectations. The laugh track also appears to be a poke at those who would say “you shouldn’t make abortion jokes;” as if to say, here we are doing it. On a basic level, it’s a perfectly normal situation and normal dialogue made strange by the presence of other people (the intrusion of the laugh track) in a private setting.

Cartman sees the accident as a business opportunity and takes possession of the stem cells, which he calls fetuses throughout the episode. It’s a very big deal that the writers use this term and not something inflammatory and inaccurate like “aborted babies.” Knowing how valuable the stem cells are, Cartman undertakes efforts to sell them to research labs, later enlisting his beleaguered pal Butters as an assistant. Though Cartman is his usual crass self, the scientists and receptionists are depicted as professional.

CARTMAN. [on phone] Hello, is this University of Colorado biology department? Great, look, I understand you're currently doing research on stem
cells? Cool, because I'm currently in possession of some aborted fetuses I'm looking to unload. How much do you pay? No, no, come on, I got a guy in Cleveland who's gonna give me eighty dollars a pound right now. How 'bout a hundred? You're breakin' my balls. I'll think about it.

[Separate call.]

Bosnod Medical Group? Yeah, I called earlier about the stem cells and the fetuses? Yeah, hi Randy, yeah. Oh, yeah, they're been kept in a cool temperature, yeah. These are primo fetuses Randy, I wouldn't jerk you around. So what can your company give me for 'em? Oh, Randy, you're breakin' my balls here. Breakin' my balls, Randy.

[Separate call.]

Oh, please! Okay, you tell me where you can get aborted fetuses for seventy cents on the dollar? You tell me, Chuck. Yeah, I didn't think so. You know, I'm just like the fetuses, Chuck. I wasn't born yesterday either. Uh-huh. So are you gonna talk to me, or are we just gonna keep bullshitting each other? Breakin' my balls, Chuck.

[Separate call.]

I gotta unload these fetuses, you wanna do some research. Are we talking here, or what, you're gonna break my balls. I'm telling you, if you let this deal pass you by, you're making a fetal mistake.

[Cartman looks up, breaking third wall, and laughs.]

A hundred ten. All right, all right, we've got a deal. Goodbye. Damn I'm good!

(season 5, episode 13, 4:26-5:41)
Though there is crass humor in treating a taboo subject brashly as a common commodity (which is satiric), the writers mostly take a gentle approach, using silly puns and jokes like “I wasn’t born yesterday” and “fetal mistake,” pushing viewers to laugh, breaking the tension and catching them off guard. Cartman’s furious when he makes a delivery to Adler Research Group and is told that stem cell research has been banned, so they can no longer buy his shipment.

In the meantime, Kenny has been diagnosed with a terminal muscular disease. Kyle and Stan are distraught and Cartman vows to overturn the stem cell research ban to find a cure. He returns to Adler Research Group to learn more about stem cells, then heads to Washington to lobby for the ban to be overturned, leading Congress in a sing-a-long of Asia’s “Heat of the Moment.” Once the ban’s lifted, an emboldened Cartman positions himself outside of Unplanned Parenthood.

Figure 10: “Kenny Dies.” South Park, season 5, episode 13, Comedy Central, 5 Dec 2001, Hulu, www.hulu.com/watch/feb531b-f3f0-420e-bc49-b4088f9ac988. (00:19:41).
[Outside Unplanned Parenthood]

CARTMAN. And so you see, now that the ban on stem cell research has been lifted, we can sell your fetus to companies like Alder Labs.

JILL. Oh, I don't know.

CARTMAN. Look, I can offer you $75 for that fetus right now, Jill.

JILL. $75? Well, all right.

CARTMAN. Great, just sign right here, please. Hi, having an abortion today? Great, listen, if you'd like to sell your abortion for research I'm offering, uh, $75. Help you out a little bit with your medical bill in there. Yeah, just sign right here. Oh, excuse me, ma'am! Can I interest you in selling your aborted fetus?

WOMAN. We're not going to the abortion clinic. I'm gonna have this baby.

CARTMAN. I'm sorry to hear that because there's a little boy dying in the hospital right now who sure could use that baby more than you could. Stem cells from your fetus could help save his life.

MAN. Oh. Well, I guess we could always just make another one.

WOMAN. Oh, Mark, I love you.

CARTMAN. All right! Now Kenny has a fighting chance.

(season 5, episode 13, 18:56-19:45)

Cartman is the vehicle for satirizing the claims of the anti-choice movement that led to the ban. Alas, Cartman has not been reformed. There were clues earlier in the episode when on his tour of Adler Labs he asks the chief scientist Larry a suspicious hypothetical question. While Mr. Garrison eulogizes Kenny by saying that “We will never forget that it was because of brave
Kenny that stem cell research was allowed to continue.” Cartman has used stem cells to grow his own Shakey’s Pizza.

The woman Cartman persuades to have an abortion resurfaces in season 9, episode 6 (“The Death of Eric Cartman”). When Stan’s mother brings home KFC for dinner, Cartman tricks his friends and eats the skin off of all the chicken, leaving them nothing. When Stan, Kyle and Kenny ignore him the next day, and convince everyone except Butters to do the same, Cartman believes that he’s died from gastrointestinal distress. Butters convinces him that in order to go to heaven, Cartman must make amends for his misdeeds. Amongst the long list is “I convinced a woman to have an abortion so I could build my own Shakey’s pizza.” Cartman’s later shown delivering a fruit basket to “ABORTION CLINIC” and Butters uses a pencil to check “Convinced woman to get abortion” off a list of Cartman’s sins. Amongst his other wrongdoings: “I took a crap in the principal’s purse, seven times… I pretended to be retarded and joined the Special Olympics. I tried to have all the Jews exterminated last spring. Uh, oh yeah, there’s this one kid whose parents I had killed and then made into chili, which I fed to the kid.” Notably it’s not the abortion that is deemed wrong, it’s the coercion, which is an important distinction.

One of South Park’s virtues is how it explores ethical systems and different perspectives. In exploring taboos, it questions traditional values. It makes a very interesting point about abortion through Cartman in season 12 (“Eek, a Penis!”). With their teacher temporarily absent, Cartman helps his class cheat on a test. When they get exceptionally high scores, the duped School Board recruits him to tutor kids at an inner city school. Nervous about fitting in, Cartman adopts the persona of “Mr. Cartmenez,” and pretends to be much older, Hispanic and street smart. He does seem to care about his students though, and lacking actual teaching bona fides,
instructs them the only way he knows how—in cheating. Soon, one of his students discovers she is pregnant.

CARTMAN (as Cartmenez). Melita, Melita, hold on! You can't quit now. Come on, what's wrong with you?

MELITA. There isn't any point to all this. I won't be going to college. I'm pregnant, all right? I just found out, and Eduardo isn't gonna help me raise it.

CARTMAN. [Sighs.] How do I reech these keeds? All right, let's go get you an abortion.

MELITA. No, I'm Catholic. I think abortion is wrong.

CARTMAN. Abortion isn't wrong! What's the one thing I've been teaching you?

MELITA. That cheating is good.

CARTMAN. Yes! And abortion is the ultimate form of cheating. You're cheating nature itself. Why do rich white girls get ahead in life? Because they get abortions when they're young. They get pregnant, but they still want to go to college, so, whatever, they just cheat. They cheat that little critter in their belly right out of a chance at life.

MELITA. I don't know Mr. C.

CARTMAN. Mexicans are told not to cheat. Don't cheat. You get pregnant, you have to raise the child. So then you have to raise the child while the white girls get to go to college and probably have a bunch more abortions. It is at our most challenging times that we must cheat our very hardest.

(season 12, episode 5, 14:23-15:38)
What Cartman’s tapped into is a simplified lesson about patriarchal systems and capitalism. One of the incentives for controlling women’s reproductive freedom is that it is linked to educational attainment, economic security and the freedom to escape abusive relationships. Cartman also is clued into the larger lesson that affluent people will always have access to safe abortion even when it is restricted.

Though it may appear on the surface to be generally supportive of reproductive rights, mostly in not observing the abortion taboo, South Park issues its own caution not to look too deep and to take things at face value in “Scrotie McBoogerballs” (season 14):

[In bookstore for release of The Poop That Took a Pee]

STAN. You can't be serious. You people like this?

MAN IN GREEN SWEATER. Some of the imagery is unbelievable.

KYLE. A woman pooping out her boobs is not good imagery!

BLACK-HAIRED MAN. Says you. You must be a pro-life nut, huh? Didn't like what the book had to say?

MARCIA. What are you talking about? This book is as pro-life as it gets.

CARTMAN. Oh, come on!

STAN. God damn it! Will you people stop reading into stuff that isn't there?

DARK HOODIE. “And the poop and the pee lived happily ever after. The end.”

Kill the phonies. Kill the phonies!

(season 14, episode 2, 19:01-19:47)

Matt Stone and Trey Parker so often espouse that, as libertarians, they are equal opportunity offenders who do not choose sides. “A Scause for Applause” (season 16, episode 13) seems another occasion of this. The writers take aim at colored rubber charity bracelets, like the yellow
LIVESTRONG one supporting a cancer organization, and those who wear them. A manufacturer character holding a “PRO LIFE” sign declares, “Do you hate abortion? Ah! Then a white scause is for you!”

Taken in context with the episode as a whole, this seems to be a criticism of believing in causes too passionately without always considering implications of the problem, the motivations of leadership or really putting forth an effort to alleviate the underlying issues. Often these are not even benefitting the cause, as indicated in a reference to unauthorized Pussy Riot merchandise at the end of the episode, which didn’t benefit the band; they function more as a reinforcement of personal identity.

In season 7, episode 13 (“Butt Out”) the boys attend a lame anti-smoking presentation at their elementary school. On the list of things that are presented as not cool—lung cancer, emphysema, AIDS and abortion. Told that if they don’t smoke they can grow up to be just like the presenters, of course the boys immediately start smoking.

Creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker have identified themselves as atheists, but have criticized self-important figures like Richard Dawkins. Notably, Richard Dawkins was a character in “Go God Go” (season 10, episode 12) and was given the line “Can you imagine a world with no religion? No Muslims killing Jews, no Christians bombing abortion clinics. The world would be a wonderful place…without god.” Dawkins has been called Islamophobic for his speech about Muslims, which is likely why “No Muslims killing Jews” may have been included there. It’s a rare instance of bringing up clinic violence on prime time television.

Another significant incidence of South Park using abortion in a storyline unfortunately coincides with some problematic content. In the first episode of season 9 (“Mr. Garrison’s Fancy
New Vagina”), Mr. Garrison undergoes a sex change to become Mrs. Garrison. She then becomes concerned when she realizes she hasn’t gotten her period.

    WOMAN AT BAR. Well, normally if a woman misses her period it means she's pregnant.
    GARRISON. Pregnant? Oh my god. Of course. I haven't gotten to experience a period because one of those truckers I slept with got me knocked up. I'm pregnant everybody! Oh, boy! Now I can have an abortion!

(season 9, episode 1, 12:26-13:12)

Garrison is delighted that she will experience what she expects is a female right and defining experience. When she discovers at Planned Parenthood (identified by name this time) that she is not capable of participating in these experiences, she lashes out.

    [Planned Parenthood exterior, then waiting room]
    GARRISON. You here for an abortion, too? Yeah, I discovered a few days ago I wasn't bleeding out my kooz, so I guess I'm knocked up. Is this doctor any good?
    NURSE. Mrs...Garrison?
    GARRISON. Oh, that's me.
    [Interior procedure room, with fetus in jar on counter]
    Hello, doctor, it looks like I need an abortion.
    DOCTOR. An abortion?
    GARRISON. Yeah, I've got one growing inside me. Now are you gonna scramble its brains or just vacuum it out? If you want you can just scramble it and I'll queef it out myself.
DOCTOR. Mr. Garrison—

GARRISON. Mrs. Garrison!

DOCTOR. Mrs. Garrison, you can't have an abortion.

GARRISON. Don't you tell me what I can and can't do with my body! A woman has the right to choose!

DOCTOR. No, I mean you're physically unable to have an abortion because you can't get pregnant.

GARRISON. But I missed my period.

DOCTOR. You can't have periods either. You had a sex change Mr. Garrison, but you don't have ovaries or a womb. You don't produce eggs.

GARRISON. You mean, I'll never know what it feels like to have a baby growing inside me, and then scramble its brains and vacuum it out?

DOCTOR. That's right.

GARRISON. But I paid $5,000 to be a woman. This would mean I'm not really a woman. I'm just a, I'm just a guy with a mutilated penis.

DOCTOR. Basically, yes.

GARRISON. Oh, boy, do I feel like a jackass.

(season 9, episode 1, 14:46-16:10)

It’s worth noting that the attending nurse’s jaw drops when Garrison describes scrambling its brains. Garrison then confronts her doctor, claiming that women should be able to have abortions and periods, and demanding he reverse her sex change. The writers were inelegantly trying to make a point that transgender folks have different experiences than cisgender folks (and some of the issues with the episode may be a consequence of the fact that the episode was rushed into
production because there were troubles fleshing out the idea and finishing it). There is no
defending that the result was a poor depiction of what it means to be transgender and this was not
one of their better episodes.

Abortion becomes integral to another episode of *South Park* the following season in
“W.T.F.,” a satire of the WWE. Excited by wrestling on TV, the boys decide to create their own
wrestling entertainment in their backyard so they can train and become professionals someday.
Believing that this is what real wrestling is, they focus on creating wild storylines, including one
where Cartman’s character, “bad Irene,” has had 14 abortions, including one when she was 7
years old. Meanwhile, the kids’ shows have attracted a crowd who completely believe all that
they’re seeing and are totally engrossed.

BUTTERS. No, Irene, please. Just this once, do not abort this baby.

CARTMAN. My body, my right. In fact, I'm jonesing for the rush so badly, I
don't think I'll make it to the clinic.

STAN. No, you can't possibly mean that—.

CARTMAN. Yes, I think maybe I'll have another abortion, right here, right now.

AUDIENCE. Ohhh!

KYLE. There's someone here to wrestle you, Irene. A baby you aborted many
years ago survived, and he's here now.

NEW WRESTLER. Mother! Why did you abort me, why?

AUDIENCE. He's alive!

CARTMAN. You, get back in the trash can where you belong.

(season 13, episode 10, 16:46-17:18)
Though this is obviously a satire, this is not far from how observers like to police and demonize women’s bodies and decision-making, and exaggerate or invent reasons for their choices that conform to stereotypes. It also plays on how often folks won’t investigate further into questionable information, especially when it plays into their biases.

*South Park* has some random references to abortion that use the word as a punchline, such as in “Dawn of the Posers” (season 17):

HOST. Howard, did you suspect at all that the gardening job at a camp for troubled teens was a set up?

HAROLD. No, they really had me convinced!

HOST. And you didn't suspect anything when we had plants tell you to turn goths and vamp kids into emos when really they're exactly the same thing?

HAROLD. I guess I should have figured it out. I'm an idiot.

HOST. Tune in again next week, when we make a woman from Milwaukee think she's working at a haunted abortion clinic."

(season 17, episode 4, 19:25-20:33)

The imagery is funny because it’s so unexpected, especially after that slow build. We all probably grew up with ghost stories and most often ghosts are adults (sometimes children). But if an abortion clinic were haunted, one could imagine it being *really* haunted.

Finally, “Woodland Critter Christmas” (season 8, episode 14) was the episode that grabbed my attention before I began writing this. It was the season finale; in other words, this is what they wanted to be remembered by for the next nine months! Only late in the episode is it revealed that Cartman has created the story and is telling it to his class. At first it appears that Stan has encountered some cute talking animals in the forest who need help building a manger
for their savior before Christmas. Soon it’s revealed that the animals worship Satan and their savior is the antichrist.


The only thing that can stop the antichrist is a mountain lion, but the critters have already tricked Stan into killing the mountain lion. Luckily, she’s left behind three cubs. They’re too little to kill the antichrist themselves (they still have their baby teeth and claws), but the narrator suggests Stan take them to the local abortion clinic to learn how to perform abortions. He objects, but is transported there anyway.

STAN. Awww...goddamnit!

NARRATOR. Said the boy in the red poofball hat. We've made it already little cubs, fancy that!
DOCTOR. Excuse me, what are you doing here?

NARRATOR. The abortion doctor inquired.

DOCTOR. If you wanna be in the O.R. a pass is required.

STAN. I don't know, I'm supposed to show these mountain lions how abortions are performed or something. I know, it's ridiculous.

DOCTOR. Well, you're in luck, I'm happy to inform. It's only three days until Christmas, so I have lots of abortions to perform! Gather round my table cute little lions, I'll teach you to do abortions without even tryin'.

NARRATOR. And so the little boy and the cubs gathered 'round the chair base.

And all day watched abortion after abortion take place.

[SONG LYRICS] Christmas time is once a year, every creature holds it dear. Every animal big or small, Christmas means so much to us all. It's once a year, it's Christmastime, and it happens once a year. It's once a year at Christmastime. When we hear about how Christmas only comes once a year.

STAN. This better have a point, dude, this really better have a point.

(season 8, episode 14, 13:40-14:56)

Indeed, the scene does show a montage of many women having the procedure, which realistically depicts how the procedure is commonly performed. The cubs try to help the doctor by bringing him instruments and allow the patients to pet them for comfort, and the procedure isn’t presented as traumatic (and in fact multiple patients are depicted as smiling and laughing). There could also be a larger commentary about how Christmas is often idealized.

It turns out that while the cubs have been learning to perform abortions, the antichrist has been born, and the critters have also found an unbaptized human host for it (Kyle). Santa arrives
to save the day and disposes of the critters, but Kyle then volunteers himself as the host (remember, it’s Cartman’s story). Kyle quickly realizes he’s made a mistake, and Santa declares that he’ll have to shoot him to kill the antichrist. Stan then remembers that the cubs can perform an abortion, and they do so on Kyle to save the day. Abortion is then responsible for the town’s happy Christmas.

CONCLUSION

Though abortion itself isn’t necessarily a funny subject (just as there’s nothing inherently funny about an appendectomy or getting your tonsils removed), adult animated comedies have found plenty to joke about regarding the power dynamics around abortion, precisely because the subject is taboo. Young adults who consume adult animated comedy (especially considering that viewing habits include repeats) are exposed to many references to abortion. These references are less problematic than many others historically in entertainment programming because they by and large do not spread misinformation about the procedure and perpetuate stigma (though they may use satire in doing so). Given the taboo paradox and huge popularity of adult animated comedy, viewers are very interested in more dialogue on this topic, and humor has a place in making these topics more approachable. This may be enough to influence these viewers perceptions of social norms, though further study would be needed. Clearly animated comedy should not be overlooked in studies of how abortion is portrayed on television.

As I was documenting incidences, I noticed that there have been fewer references and allusions in adult animated comedy in recent years. I suspect this is because to use the word for the sake of the word is less shocking than it was originally. There’s no evidence to indicate that this is due to increased censorship or change of tone around this topic. It takes a fair amount of
work to make a good joke around abortion land. Given the record, I don’t believe that creatives would hesitate to include the subject or word were the story or punchline to call for it. Perhaps the gender makeup of the writers’ rooms have changed? As shows age, people leave for new opportunities. I also wonder if, now that more nuanced and truthful stories around reproductive health are being produced in for live television programs, that it doesn’t feel as interesting or urgent for those involved with adult animated comedy to explore? For example, the Presidential Election of 2016 has influenced storytelling on BoJack Horseman, Rick and Morty and South Park. It should be noted that BoJack Horseman carried both a satire on the election and a moving storyline involving an unplanned pregnancy in season 4.

As portrayals of abortion because more diverse, nuanced and truthful on non-animated entertainment programs, adult animated comedy’s role in breaking taboos should be recognized and continue to be studied.
Notes

i It should be noted that the Writers’ Guild win was not a decisive one, as all parties appealed the decision and it remained in the courts for years. Pressure from Standard and Practices continued though the Family Viewing Hour disappeared after the summer of 1977.

ii Section 326 of the Communications Act of 1934 prohibits the FCC from censoring broadcast material, meaning demanding changes before a program airs or prohibiting it from being aired. You can see the First Amendment issues at hand. The Act does not prevent the FCC from fining or otherwise disciplining networks once a program has already aired.

iii The code was established on December 6, 1951 but was put into practice beginning in 1952 and is thus more popularly known as such.

iv FOX was clear that it wanted to compete as a fourth network, though when it launched its stations only reached 22% of the country and it wasn’t considered a network by the FCC (because it did not program enough hours), and so, to FOX’s advantage, was exempt from certain regulations.

v The exception being a 1970 summer replacement show, Where’s Huddles?, on CBS.

vi I surveyed episodes that aired through spring 2017.

vii Family Guy aired irregularly in its second and third seasons and was cancelled in 2002 (its final episode aired in 2003) before being brought back by FOX in May 2005.
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