

## Get It Right, Episode 3 – Abortion Providers on TV

Jamie: Welcome to Get It Right, the new podcast series from Rewire. I am your host, Jamie Broadnax, the founder and creator of Black Girl Nerds. We're here to analyze pop culture through the lens of justice and today we're taking a look at all of the ways television has portrayed abortion providers over the last decade or so. You might be surprised at how many shows have tackled the issue and how many of those get it right. To cover all of television, you need to do a ton of research and reporting. Fortunately, Gretchen Sisson will be joining us today and she's done exactly that. Gretchen is a qualitative sociologist and she works with a group called Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health. Her current research focuses on representations of abortion and reproductive decision making in pop culture. Now, let's see which shows Gretchen thinks get it right and which ones don't. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Gretchen: Thanks for having me, Jamie.

Jamie: Tell us a little bit about the work that you do regarding Abortion Onscreen.

Gretchen: The Abortion Onscreen program is really designed to look at how abortion and reproduction decision making are portrayed in our popular culture. The idea is that because abortion is so stigmatized and there's so much cultural silence around abortion as far as interpersonal sharing, then these fictional stories that we see on TV become particularly salient in shaping people's knowledge of and opinions around abortion, so we think that these stories are really important to look at. What messages are being shared, whose stories are being shared, which stories are missing, what social myths are being perpetuated. We look at the patterns that we see in these representations and try and draw conclusions about how we can better improve these cultural narratives around abortion and what it reflects about society as a whole and their beliefs around these issues.

Jamie: Gretchen, we're always interested in discussing how abortion and reproductive healthcare is presented in pop culture, but you've released some new research on a fascinating topic, how abortion providers are portrayed on television.

Gretchen: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie: Can you go into some of the things that you found in your research?

Gretchen: Yes. This paper is our third Abortion Onscreen paper. The past ones have just been establishing a baseline of what stories were out there and then we had a paper looking at character demographics and reasons for getting an abortion, so for this paper we really wanted to zero in on the providers, so the people performing the abortions or offering to perform the abortions on TV. We know that there's a lot of stigma out there around abortion providers. They face a fair amount of harassment and threat and, on occasion, violence, so we really wanted to see how they were portrayed, what stories are being told about them to inform the public imagination around providers. This paper looks at a sample from 2005 to 2014, so that 10 year span, and looked at any character

on American TV that offered to perform an abortion or attempted to perform an abortion.

Jamie: In the end how many abortion plot lines did you discover?

Gretchen: As far as our sample that we looked at for this most recent study, which was just this 10 year window looking specifically at stories that included an abortion provider or an abortion space, so a place where abortion is offered, a clinic, a hospital, doctors' office, the woods ... We got a few crazy ones in there. Those are our criteria for this sample. That included 52 plot lines.

Jamie: Are these mostly story lines that are taking place in contemporary day or are these back before abortions were legal, just earlier on? What's the time frame for each of these plot lines?

Gretchen: I would say about three quarters are contemporary stories. The remaining quarter are set in the most and most of the ones that are set in the past, are set well in the past, pre-Roe certainly, so these are illegal abortion stories.

Jamie: Is it generally shown as clean and safe or risky?

Gretchen: The contemporary abortions that are set in medical settings, so that are in clinics or doctors' offices, those are portrayed as safe. There are a few exceptions to that. For example, on the TV show Hannibal there is a forced abortion that's performed. Actually, they're doing complete hysterectomy to end her pregnancy. That one is not safe, as you can imagine, given the fact that she's tied to the table and crying during the procedure and the doctors are wearing bread scrubs. It's just generally quite creepy, but Hannibal is of course horror show, so having this unsafe coercive abortion is probably fairly consistent with the overall tone of the show.

For the most part, abortions that are set in contemporary medical settings, those are safe. Now, there are some stories that are set in the present day that aren't medical abortions. For example, on Orange is the New Black. When you have Gloria making a tea to help Daya try to end her pregnancy, or the same thing on True Blood, when Holly is making a tea to try to end this pregnancy and they have this Wiccan ceremony out in the woods. There are attempts at abortion. Neither of those abortions are successful and neither of those pregnancies are ended, but you see these fringe attempts happening. They're not unsafe. Nothing happens to the woman, but they also don't actually lead to an abortion.

Jamie: Because in your research here and in this essay that was written you do talk about stigma, do you find that now TV shows have a more accurate as well as positive representation of what it is to have an abortion performed or do you still think that the TV shows now are just showing that negative stigma and not really showing an accurate portrayal of the options for women these days dealing with reproductive health issues?

Gretchen: I think it's important to remember that if you're a screenwriter or a TV show producer,

and you're including a plot line about abortion, you're probably pretty well intentioned in doing so because that's a risk for a writer or a producer or a director to take, so I tend to be pretty optimistic and think that they are trying to show something that will counter stigma in the process. What we see in the aggregate is that it might not always work out that way. For example, if you have a screenwriter who's writing this story that takes place before abortion is legal and it's a very dangerous abortion, that might be a commentary on the fact that we need legal abortion, that illegal abortion is dangerous for women and it needs to be legalized so that it can be kept safe.

When we see so many of those stories, so many examples on screen where abortion is unsafe, then that becomes a narrative that people see over and over again. We know that abortion on TV leads to death a ridiculous of the time, about 10,000 times more so than in real life. There are more deaths from abortion on TV than there are deaths from abortion in real life each year, despite the fact that there are maybe 20 to 30 abortions on TV and over a million abortions in real life in the US every year. I think that that gives people a skewed perception of the risk involved and the seriousness of abortion as a medical procedure. Again, that can have good intentions.

People could be trying to communicate a destigmatizing message about abortion and that process, but in the aggregate, that's not always the story that's coming across. There's a research paper out there on how CPR is portrayed on TV. CPR is, on TV, almost always effective. It's always safe. There's no risk to the person getting CPR. It's portrayed unrealistically well and that's as a whole, right? Which isn't to say that in real life CPR doesn't work sometimes. It does, so it's hard to say that those individual stories are unrealistic or bad. They aren't, but we're seeing the opposite with abortion, where abortion is more dangerous and risky and more homogeneous in this unrealistic way, so it's really just about diversifying the depictions.

Jamie: Because truth be told, most of these shows have male show runners, male writers, do you think that these stigmas remain because they simply don't know enough or do you feel like it's something where they just have to be super dramatic and show the traumatizing effects of undergoing an abortion? Why do you think that there are so many negative stigmas associated with what we're seeing in film and television?

Gretchen: I think part of what you're saying is true. Abortion as a medical procedure is so, so straightforward. It's pretty boring. It's pretty quick. There's no interesting medical effort that needs to go into it. It's pretty routine. Recovery is pretty quick. It doesn't give you the same dramatic opportunity as a lot of other emergency medical situations, for example. We know that most abortion stories are on dramas, but the vast majority aren't dramas, so screenwriters are trying to tell you a dramatic story, but the drama from abortion doesn't need to be in the medicine of it.

You don't need to create medical risk in order to make an abortion dramatic. You can be telling the story about that person's decision making process or their relationship or the effort that they need to put forth to access the abortion and raise money and get to the clinic. All of those things have the potential for drama. They also have the potential for comedy, of course, too. I think that begs the question of why so many abortion stories

are on dramas and so few are on comedies, which is a pattern that we've seen in this most recent research. There are very, very few comedies that include abortion. We've seen a few examples of that recently. The most recent abortion story on TV was on the Netflix show *BoJack Horseman*, which was a really interesting plot line. It was very funny, so we've seen that abortion can be funny.

I think it'll be interesting to see what screenwriters and show runners do moving forward, whether they try to think of new ways to tell an abortion story that can be more funny, more lighthearted. We also saw it on *Girls* last January. I'm sorry, two Januaries ago. Yes, January of 2015, when Mimi-Rose got an abortion and just disclosed that she'd gotten an abortion yesterday, very matter of fact. Lena Dunham said that she wanted that to be so different from abortion stories that have been on TV in the past, that the viewer almost didn't know what was going on. While that wasn't a straightforward comedy, it was quite a unique portrayal, so I think that people are trying to think of how to tell these stories differently and I think one way is finding ways to make them interesting other than by making them dangerous.

Jamie: Aside from drama and comedy, you touched on it before with fantasy shows like *True Blood*, what are some science fiction and fantasy shows that tackle the topic and where do they show the abortions actually taking place?

Gretchen: Yeah. *Battlestar Galactica* had two abortion stories that were both handled really well, where someone was a refugee, essentially coming to *Galactica* to get an abortion from Dr. Sherman Cottle. She sort of stows away and sneaks on to the ship. He tells her to claim political asylum so that she has the right to stay there and get her abortion. That was a really interesting story and of course the abortion there took place on the ship. There's *True Blood* with their abortion out in the woods. The TV show *Salem*, which is this supernatural fantasy version of, of course, witchcraft in Salem in colonial Massachusetts. The first scene of the first episode of that show is this abortion that is of course also an initiation to witchcraft, so it's sort of this demonic possession abortion that's happening in the woods. Okay, what else? What other fantasy shows there are? There are quite a few. *American Horror Story* has a lot ... I don't know if that quite qualifies as fantasy, but *American Horror Story* set several plot lines dealing with abortion.

Jamie: It's a genre TV show, so yeah, definitely.

Gretchen: Yeah, yeah. There are a good number out there. What's interesting is that most of those abortions don't work, so even when you're in a universe where witchcraft is real, a witch can't actually perform an abortion successfully. Even when you're in a universe where magic is real, magic won't work to end the pregnancy. Interestingly, there was a short lived TV show on ABC called *Defying Gravity*, where the woman has a medication abortion and ends up hemorrhaging and needs a hysterectomy. That's supposed to take place in the future. This woman is an astronaut, but abortion is still happening with the same medical procedure and it's still so dangerous. Just the idea that we can make all these other advances in science, that she's literally colonizing another planet, but abortion care still look like it does today and it's in fact much more risky than it is today

is, I think, intriguing.

Jamie: Are there any shows, either the ones that you've mentioned or other shows, that have provided any kind of motivation for abortion providers and why they do this work?

Gretchen: I think the one I mentioned about Battlestar Galactica, where Dr. Cottle advises the young woman seeking the abortion to claim political asylum, he very clearly has this political sense of his work and that is a necessary service for women throughout their universe, really. He says, when he's describing what he does, that girls come to him and he does abortions and they go on their way. He has the sense of duty to provide it in a show where abortion is difficult to access. On Grey's Anatomy and Private Practice, Addison Montgomery Shepherd, she performs abortions a couple of times throughout both shows.

She performs abortions. Her motivation, she says, is both the fact that she's had an abortion and she wants to treat her patients with the same dignity that she feels that she deserved when she got her abortion. She also has a really dramatic scene where she's about to perform an abortion and she says, "There are only 1,700 abortion providers in this country and I'm one of them." Again, a sense of duty that abortion is difficult to access. There aren't many providers in this country. She feels a sense of duty to perform this service and to perform it well for her patients. With Addison and with Sherman Cottle we see those heroic motivations and this sense of duty and this sense of doing good and caring about their patients.

We also see the greedy provider that won't perform the abortion until they get paid. We see that on Call the Midwife with the provider who performs a pretty dangerous abortion that sends a woman into a coma and she needs a hysterectomy. We see the woman needing to sell her curtains, for example, to pay for the procedure. There are a couple of other providers like that, that are very clearly motivated by money. We also see, of course, in the Salem with the abortion being the demonic initiation use very evil motivations for providing abortion care. So it really runs the gamut.

Jamie: Unfortunately in the real world, abortion providers can be the target of violence. Has TV tackled that and how do they do?

Gretchen: We of course tracked violence, both against providers and against clinics. About 10% of the stories that included a provider included violence against clinics. Only have 52 plot lines, so that's five plot lines. It's not a ton in a 10 year time period, but it's definitely there. It's definitely this underlying recurring theme. Even stories that don't include violence, that include the doctor putting on a bulletproof vest, for example, or having a security guard outside the clinic that you see. There are other ways that these stories signal the presence of threat and violence, even if a violent doesn't actually occur in the course of that story.

The one that I think it's the most worthy of mentioning is a Law & Order episode from 2009, where an abortion provider is killed. It's a provider that is killed at church. He is shot in the head at church after servicing as a usher. It's very, very clearly a root from

the headline story after the murder of Dr. George Tiller. In the course of this Law & Order story though, it turns out that this doctor is guilty of infanticide and he's really demonized, which is fine, of course. Any doctor guilty of infanticide, like Kermit Gosnell, should absolutely be prosecuted. That's appalling practice. I'm not trying to condone that, but of course Tiller was not guilty of that. To have a character so clearly modeled after Tiller's death and then to just malign his life is a really interesting commentary on how Dr. Tiller as a real provider is being understood in these narratives.

Jamie: What was show that you were most surprised to find an abortion plot in?

Gretchen: I'm hardly ever surprised. These things end up everywhere. I'm most surprised when it's a show that ends up capturing a younger audience. We've seen abortion consideration plot lines on *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*. Of course they don't actually get the abortion there, but they definitely talk about it. The one that I thought was the most interesting was this CW show *Reign*, which is this fantastical version of the life of Mary, Queen of Scots, in which one of her ladies-in-waiting goes to get an abortion and then rides out through the snow to this cabin in the woods.

Mary follows after her and saves her life because this abortion is just going to be too dangerous. It's very dramatic. That's a show very clearly designed for a teenage audience. I think that's really interesting when they're trying to handle it in that way, and the fact that the abortion is portrayed as just too risky. This is the 16th century French court. A lady-in-waiting who's pregnant without being married is in terrible trouble, all right? They don't get into any of that, but they do get into the fact that the abortion is just too risky to imagine. Again, when it's designed for a younger audience, I find that pretty interesting.

Another one that I can think of that falls into that category is from ABC Family, the TV show *The Fosters*. In 2014, they had a plot line where one of the mothers on the show is pregnant and she gets an abortion at 20 weeks. They find that she's preeclampsia and continuing the pregnancy will be a significant health risk to herself, so she gets an abortion. It's the latest abortion I've seen on TV at 20 weeks. It's portrayed very compassionately with this character who's really one of the primary protagonists of the show. Portrayed with a lot of sympathy, a lot of heart, a much better destigmatizing portrayal for young people.

Jamie: Was there any interesting you found that didn't make it into the article you published on this?

Gretchen: Any study will lead you to have more questions than it answers. The analysis that I started doing now are to look at how the procedure itself is portrayed, so we notice this pattern that there aren't really any medication abortions that are being shown on TV. We see a lot of the abortion procedures happening in ambulatory surgical centers or hospitals rather than clinics, where they mostly happen in real life. One of our next analysis will be to look at that, what does the procedure actually look like. Not just who's doing it and what are their stories, but what's the procedure actually happening and is being shown on screen. We'll look at that. There have actually been a number of

really interesting examples about that since we closed this sample, so throughout 2015 and first half of this year, we've seen a few interesting examples. That paper will work with it, extended timeline too so we'll be able to include those newer stories.

Jamie: Gretchen, this is so fascinating. Where can people find more of your work?

Gretchen: Yeah, so we have a website. It'll link you right to the answer website. You can just go to [abortiononscreen.org](http://abortiononscreen.org). We have some cool infographics. You're welcome to share them far and wide. It'll also have links to all of our research papers. The one that we've been talking as today just came out, so I don't even know if it's up yet, but it will up there as soon as it is available. As far as future projects, like I said, I'm looking at the analysis of the procedure itself, how that's portrayed, health and safety outcomes. We've done tracking of mortality outcomes, so how often characters are dying from abortions.

We want to look at other morbidity outcomes like infertility or depression or mental health issues that the character just dealing with afterward, how that compare to the rates that women are dealing with in real life, so we'll be looking at that. I'm also working on a paper on how different genres are using abortion stories differently, so legal dramas, medical dramas, comedies, horror programs. What's the narrative purpose of including an abortion in that story, how do they use it? We have a couple of interesting studies in the works. I'm excited to see what else we can find and kind of inform this conversation and hopefully help content creators that make TV a little better, a little more interesting, a little more [preventative 00:24:58], a little more diverse.

Jamie: Thanks so much for being here, Gretchen.

Gretchen: Thanks for having me.

Jamie: Thanks again to Gretchen for joining us. Remember to check out her research for even more information. Please make sure to head over to iTunes, and rate and review our show. Add a comment with topics you'd like us to cover as well. You can also hear and read more about me at [blackgirlnerds.com](http://blackgirlnerds.com) and listen to our podcast, the Black Girl Nerds podcast, also known as the BGM Podcast. We're located on iTunes, Stitcher, SoundCloud, Spreaker and Google Play Music. Get It Right is hosted by me, Jamie Broadnax. The show is produced by Marc Faletti, Rewire's Director of Multimedia. Editorial input is provided by senior reporter Jenn Stanley and oversight by Jodi Jacobson, Rewire's president and editor in chief.