

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **BROADCASTING BIRTH CONTROL:  
FAMILY PLANNING AND MASS MEDIA,  
1914-1984**

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The history of the birth control movement in the United States is traditionally told through accounts of the leaders and organizations that campaigned to legalize the distribution of contraception. Only recently have historians begun to examine the “cultural work” of printed media including newspapers, magazines, and even novels in fostering support for the cause. This dissertation builds on this scholarship, to examine the films and radio and television broadcasts developed by birth control advocates, and the communications experts they increasingly turned to for guidance, over the course of the twentieth century. As advocates tried to mimic the efforts of commercial advertisers to “sell” health-related behaviors to a wide audience, they crafted the new academic specialty of health communication. I argue that mass media was central to the campaign to transform the private subject of fertility control into one fit for public discussion in the United States. Moreover, the international family planning movement played an instrumental role in establishing and expanding health communication in the promotion of contraception around the globe.

As they negotiated for access to cinema and radio platforms from which to promote their cause, birth control advocates toned down their feminist rhetoric of sexual liberation. After the legalization of contraception, censorship and broadcasting conventions affecting educational messages further diluted the kinds of representations they could promote over the radio and on the nation's television sets. As commercial media became increasingly explicit in the 1960s and '70s, family planning promoters conversely expunged sex from their broadcasts for domestic and foreign audiences. In this way, media helped to shape the messages of the movement.

Seeking greater creative freedom, some of the family planning community began to cultivate informal partnerships with entertainment media producers, perfecting a strategy abroad that would be brought home to the U.S. The Mexican "education-entertainment" approach has since become the most influential model of family planning communication, replicated around the world in efforts to reintroduce the context of sex and relationships to the promotion of contraceptive use. This history is thus a transnational narrative of the dissemination of messages and the technologies and techniques that delivered them.

BROADCASTING BIRTH CONTROL: FAMILY PLANNING  
AND MASS MEDIA, 1914-1984

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2010

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Elizabeth Fee and Patti Tuohy at the National Library of Medicine for providing the encouragement and support needed to complete this project. Nancy Dosch helped me identify and view material from the library's film collections, and my colleagues in the Exhibition Program kindly accommodated my schedule during the writing phase, and cheered me on throughout. I am also especially grateful to Hugh Rigby and Anwar Singletary for their assistance during their time at the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Communication Programs. Both made extraordinary efforts to locate vital materials and rescue films and documents in danger of being permanently lost. Archivists at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College and the Schlesinger Library, Harvard helped me to navigate complicated unprocessed collections and pointed me to additional sources. Matthew Connelly also directed me to useful materials at the headquarters of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in London, where Sarah Shaw arranged for me to have complete access to their onsite resources. Gail Gilbert and May Miculis organized a rewarding visit to the Airlie Conference Center to allow me to rifle through their storage facilities. Katherine Bliss, Peter Engelman, Johanna Schoen, and Gabriela Soto Laveaga generously shared pre-publication drafts of their work, and Devin Orgeron offered invaluable feedback on my first draft chapter. Finally, the members of my dissertation writing group, Anna Bedford, Amy Corbin, Henrike Lehnguth, and Amber Nelson gave up a great deal of their time to share their enthusiasm and ideas. I truly appreciate the efforts of everyone who helped me along the way.

## Epigraph

“Should we allow the women to continue to use injurious, health-ruining measures to prevent conception, or, what is still worse, hurry themselves to their graves by repeated abortions – or should the knowledge of sage and hygienic anticoncepts – for there are such – be spread broadcast?”

Socialist physician William J. Robinson, *Limitation of Offspring*, 1904

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Epigraph.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Private Life and Public Health.....	8
Sources and Methods.....	16
Overview of Chapters.....	18
Chapter 2: Battling Silence and Censorship.....	23
“Pictures with a Purpose”.....	25
Promoting Birth Control on the Big Screen.....	30
The Limits of Propaganda.....	40
A Second Chance at the Cinema.....	46
The Shift to the Radio.....	51
Banning Birth Control from the Airwaves.....	55
Education versus Commercialism.....	59
Storytelling Replaces the Lecture Format.....	65
Opposition on the Radio.....	67
“Helping a Nation at War”.....	70
Conclusion.....	75
Chapter 3: The Medium Shapes the Message.....	79
Diffusing the Population Bomb.....	81
Moving Into the Mainstream.....	90
“A Giant Leap in Public Approval”.....	96
Family Planning Advertising.....	104
Putting Abortion on the Air.....	111
Planned Parenthood Enters the Abortion Wars.....	119
Conclusion.....	124
Chapter 4: “Most of the World’s People Need Planned Parenthood”.....	127
From Population Control to Female Empowerment.....	134
Launching International Family Planning: India Leads the Way.....	138
The “KAP-gap”.....	147
Turning Point - “No-one ever planned their family with a poster”.....	154
The Transformation of Family Planning Film.....	159
The Failures of Film.....	167
Moving into Folk Media.....	172
Feminism and New Media Strategies.....	181
Conclusion.....	185
Chapter 5: Soap Opera as Soap Box: Family Planning and.....	189

the Telenovela .....	189
The Hidden History of Birth Control in Mexico .....	191
Family Planning on the Small Screen .....	201
Ethical Issues .....	211
Conclusion: Exporting Entertainment-Education .....	213
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	218
Causes and Effects .....	224
Family Planning Media Today.....	227
Bibliography .....	235



## List of Figures

1. Film still showing Margaret Sanger's arrest as portrayed in the motion picture *Birth Control*, p. 38
2. Baby show apparently sponsored by the movie theater showing the anti-birth control film *The House Without Children*, Washington, D.C., 1919, p. 44
3. Photograph of purported fetal experimentation, p. 123
4. Hand-drawn depiction of fetal experimentation on a letter sent to the Children's Television Workshop, 8 October, 1973, p. 123
5. A mobile film unit presentation to a rural community in Morocco, n.d., p. 132
6. Members of the Baziri tribe listen to the radio. Somalia, 1963, p. 146
7. Donald Duck illustrates overpopulation. *Family Planning*, 1969, p. 151
8. A rural community in India watches the television, n.d., p. 216

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The history of the birth control movement in the United States is traditionally told through accounts of the leaders and organizations that campaigned to legalize the distribution of contraception. Only recently have historians begun to examine the “cultural work” of printed media including newspapers, magazines, and even novels in fostering support for the cause.<sup>1</sup> This dissertation builds on this scholarship, moving beyond the printed page to examine the films, and radio and television broadcasts, developed by birth control advocates and the communications experts they increasingly turned to for guidance, over the course of the twentieth century. My approach takes advantage of a rich and relatively unexplored archive of media materials, to illuminate more fully the movement’s campaign to transform the private subject of birth control into one fit for public discussion. These sources provide new insights into the critical role of media in this process.

Despite having been overlooked by most scholars, mass media was integral to the birth control movement’s efforts to first, build support for their campaign, and later, to publicize the idea of fertility control and the availability of contraceptive

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<sup>1</sup> Beth Widmaier Capo, *Textual Conception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007). On the marketing of new contraceptive technologies see Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, *On the Pill: A History of Oral Contraceptives 1950-1970* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), chaps. 2-4. For an earlier study of the role of the news media, see Cynthia Goldstein, “The Press and the Beginning of the Birth Control Movement in the United States,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1985). Peter Engelman’s forthcoming book illustrates the extensive publicity the movement received in local and national newspapers, spreading the idea of birth control countrywide. As he concludes on p. 61 of *A Short History of the Birth Control Movement in America*, “[t]hrough extensive local newspaper coverage, Sanger’s message reached a much larger audience than has been depicted in scholarly treatments of her early activism, which have focused on the limited readership of the radical press and the union-fed crowds that came to hear her speak.”

services. In this dissertation I argue, therefore, that mass media was central to the promotion of family planning in the United States and internationally. I am not concerned here with measuring the specific impact of media on laws and social prohibitions against birth control—after all, other factors contributed to the gradual shift in its favor. My focus is on the expectations birth control advocates held for film, radio, and television, and how these expectations, and the media themselves, helped shape the messages they disseminated.

The story is not one of uninterrupted progress from repression to openness. In fact, information about ways to prevent or end pregnancy circulated freely in the early nineteenth century in family conversations and in consultations with midwives and healers, and began to appear in print in the 1830s.<sup>2</sup> By the 1850s, magazines, newspapers, and popular health manuals featured numerous advertisements for drugs and home treatments. This increasing visibility brought the topic of reproductive control under the scrutiny of purity crusaders and members of the medical profession, who sought to stamp out the proliferation of advertising and the activities of non-physicians.<sup>3</sup> The distribution of material about contraception and abortion was eventually restricted thanks to their efforts. In 1873, Anthony Comstock, founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, successfully petitioned Congress

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<sup>2</sup> Norman Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (Baltimore: The Williams & Wilkins Company, 1936); Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001). Historian James Mohr has argued that the impetus for the criminalization of abortion came, in part, from the raised profile of practice through the flourishing industry of abortifacients and its advertisement. *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy, 1800-1900* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 42. Prior to the criminalization of abortion between 1830 and 1880, practices to restore menstruation before “quickening,” (i.e. the movement of the fetus in the womb, determined by the pregnant woman), were considered morally acceptable by lay men and women, and there was widespread recognition that even “respectable” married women engaged in the practice.

to limit the postal delivery of “obscene materials,” including descriptions of contraceptive devices and abortifacients or information on how to obtain them. The ruling was followed by similar state laws, the last of which was not overturned until 1965.

In the decades following the Comstock Act, advocates for “voluntary motherhood” launched a campaign to legalize contraception, but the movement made few gains against the powerful anti-obscenity lobby. In the early twentieth century, Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, and Mary Ware Dennett spearheaded various efforts, with Sanger quickly becoming the movement’s leading figure. From the very beginning of their activities, campaigners used the mass media as a way around the Comstock law.<sup>4</sup>

Historians characterize the period between 1914 and 1936 as one of declining radicalism as Sanger established her leadership. The movement shifted away from the rhetoric of female sexual liberation that had first informed its efforts, in an attempt to make “birth control” respectable, replacing the term and narrowing the agenda, to “family planning.” This is often described as the end of the “agitation” phase, in which birth control advocates gave up their most controversial activities in an effort to build alliances with powerful elite groups, especially the medical profession.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> James Reed’s history is named for this process, although he does not focus on the mass media, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society Since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, 1978). Other scholars have focused on the parallel efforts of scientific researchers to make birth control a respectable research topic, as “From Smut to Science,” the title of part two of Tone’s book, conveys. See also Adele E. Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and the “Problem of Sex,”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). On the early years of birth control activism see Robyn Rosen, *Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights: Reformers and the Politics of Maternal Welfare, 1917- 1940* (Ohio State University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Linda Gordon, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976); Joan M. Gaulard, “Woman Rebel: The Rhetorical Strategies of Margaret Sanger and the American Birth Control Movement, 1912-1938” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University,

Incorporating media history into the history of the birth control movement demonstrates, however, that rather than retreating into dignified discussion only with medical experts, birth control advocates continued to use mass culture to build broad support.<sup>6</sup>

Decades later, as American advocates began to collaborate with their international colleagues to promote family planning, they again faced the question of how to establish respectability. Although some private negotiations were crucial, family planning promoters remained convinced that by sheer virtue of their public visibility, media activities could also convey the idea of widespread acceptance if they were carefully deployed.

Historians may have overemphasized the extent to which the birth control movement traded controversy for propriety in their efforts to win mainstream approval. In fact, as I shall illustrate here, campaigners' forays into the mass media provoked outrage and censorship in each new medium. As the birth control debate transcended the written word to become images on a screen or phrases broadcast over the radio, critics scrambled to define the parameters of what should be seen or heard, and by whom. The introduction of each format, from film, to radio and television,

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1978); James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*. Reed concludes that this transition allowed birth control advocates to leave class politics behind and align themselves with the influential medical profession, winning an important ally for their campaign. Gordon is more critical of this process, arguing that reformers turned away from an earlier association with feminism and socialism. This strategy divorced reproductive rights from women's rights more generally, and undermined the goal of empowerment for all women.

<sup>6</sup> The movement also produced technical films to educate the medical profession on contraceptive techniques, such as *The Biology of Conception and the Mechanism of Contraception* (1922), produced by the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau. Such films were later developed for international use to train health care workers, and as "follow-up" films to explain particular methods to people agreeing to adopt family planning practices. They are not discussed in this study as I instead focus here on persuasive, rather than informational materials. Sex education materials are also excluded because they constitute a separate, albeit related, genre.

sparked renewed concern over media's ability to inform, influence, or, if left unregulated, corrupt the audience.

Attempting to professionalize the movement, Sanger's Birth Control Federation of America (later the Planned Parenthood Federation of America) did hire physicians to fill key roles in the organization, and handed over responsibility for the distribution of contraception to the medical profession. This collaborative strategy (which as historians have noted, compromised the original idea of woman-led fertility control), was replicated in the media production processes of the birth control movement. Although originally media activities were undertaken by the same women who campaigned for the organization, including Sanger, these activities were gradually assigned to a rising class of professional communications experts.

Previously, Sanger and her colleagues had used media with great confidence in its effects, but they had not critically evaluated its impact. Much of their early work had been undertaken without any detailed study of the most persuasive uses, largely because of the implicit assumption that radio and print were influential and that cinema was especially so.<sup>7</sup> Beginning in the 1930s, however, scholars in the emerging field of communications began to evaluate the role and influence of mass media more carefully. The first major study relating to birth control was launched in Indianapolis in 1937, in response to the shrinking size of white middle-class families. This early survey of 1,444 "relatively fecund" Protestant white couples was intended to show

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<sup>7</sup> In the early years of legal birth control, clinic staff collected only minimal data on the number of people they advised annually and the type and amount of contraception distributed. Julian L. Simon, "A Huge Marketing Task—Birth Control," *Journal of Marketing Research* V (February 1968): 21.

how to promote larger, rather than smaller, families.<sup>8</sup> Attempts to measure public attitudes towards family limitation were not taken up in earnest until after World War II.

During the war years, psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists interested in persuasive communications applied their research to propaganda efforts to bolster support for the conflict at home and promote the image of the United States around the world. The emerging specialty they forged grew significantly during this period as influential European scholars, including Theodor Adorno and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, emigrated to the United States, and as leading psychologists, such as Carl I. Hovland and Harold D. Lasswell, took up related research.<sup>9</sup> As postwar concerns turned to maintaining peace, the idea that overpopulation could destabilize nations made the subject a high priority for some of these scholars as they looked for peacetime applications of their work. As a result, many of the founding members of the communications field also became influential figures in family planning promotion, including Wilbur Schramm, who founded the world's first academic communications department at the University of Illinois in 1947.<sup>10</sup> Several other key

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<sup>8</sup> The results were reevaluated in terms of population control in the 1950s. Clyde V. Kiser and P. K. Whelpton, "Resume of the Indianapolis Study of Social and Psychological Factors Affecting Fertility," *Population Studies* 7 (November 1953).

<sup>9</sup> For an account of the history of communications and the role of these influential figures, see Everett M. Rogers, *A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> The University of Chicago group was named the Committee on Communication and Public Opinion, and the University of Illinois department was known as the Institute of Communications Research. The field continued to grow in the 1950s, with the International Communication Association founded in 1950 and the launch of their publication, *The Journal of Communication*, in 1951. In 1963 the journal published a special issue on "Communication and Mental Health," the first issue devoted to a health topic. Communication scholars usually trace their history to Wilbur Schramm's department, although in "How Not to Found a Field: New Evidence on the Origins of Mass Communications Research," Karin Wahl-Jorgensen argues that a series of committees at the University of Chicago, as well as post-war research at Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Columbia, and Berkeley, should also be included in accounts of the emergence of the field. *Journal of Communication* (September 2004): 560.

researchers began their work at a pioneering communications program at the University of Chicago, such as Bernard Berelson, one of the first group of scholars on the faculty there, who joined the Ford Foundation in 1951 and ten years later became director of a new communications research program at the Population Council.<sup>11</sup> Donald J. Bogue, also from the University of Chicago, developed the most influential communications theory of the 1960s, first used in agricultural development and quickly transferred to the promotion of family planning.

Communications scholars had studied everything from voter motivation in political campaigns to the role of mass culture in the creation of a consumer society. As some tried to mimic the efforts of commercial advertisers to “sell” health-related behaviors, including the use of birth control, to a wide audience, they crafted a new academic specialty that came to be known as health communication. Practitioners divide the field of health communication into specific areas of research: analysis and intervention in media representations of health issues, scientific communication between researchers, communication between health care providers and between physician and patient, and health education campaigns. Of these, the majority of research fits within interpersonal communication between patient and physician, and mass communication health education campaigns.<sup>12</sup> In the formative years of health communication between the 1960s and the 1980s, as the United States government funded family planning programs around the world, this one subject dominated the field’s research on the uses of mass media. The focus generated the wealth of media products I explore here, as well as a canon of key theories for their development and

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<sup>11</sup> He was appointed vice president in 1963 and president in 1968.

<sup>12</sup> S.C. Ratzan, J.G. Payne, and C. Bishop “The Status and Scope of Health Communication,” *Journal of Health Communication* 1 (1996): 26.



use. The international family planning movement thus played an instrumental role in establishing and expanding health communication as the field's methods were theorized, applied, and evaluated in the promotion of contraception around the globe.

With their background so far removed from the feminist origins of the birth control movement, many in the communications field were more focused on the goal of successful persuasion than with the idea of female empowerment. The influx of communications professionals thus further diluted the campaigners' focus on women's rights, in much the same way that collaboration with the medical profession had done in previous years. However, while Sanger's earlier compromise would radically alter the kinds of contraceptives available and the ease with which women could access them, the clash of agendas between feminists and communications professionals was more quickly understood and addressed.<sup>13</sup> As I explore here, the debate that later emerged in international family planning over the ethics of media persuasion and the promotion of family limitation, emerged in part because of the influence of communications theorists on the strategies of the movement.

## **Private Life and Public Health**

A recent "turn to the visual" in the history of medicine has created a wealth of relevant research on health-related advertising. Scholars have shown how public health advocates, convinced of the power of mass media to influence audiences, used

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<sup>13</sup> There is not a clear delineation between these two groups. Indeed, many in the communications field had feminist intentions, and some feminists were more inclined towards persuasive methods than others. In fact, the subtleties of personal philosophies are not easily discerned even in the archives of particular individuals, as it was common for people to express their motivation or agenda in different terms depending on the sympathies of their correspondents.

film, radio, and television to deliver educational messages ever since they were introduced.<sup>14</sup> This extends even to early campaigns on such intimate topics as breast and cervical cancer and venereal disease.<sup>15</sup> In fact, although scholars have sometimes assumed that social taboos surrounding such subjects excluded them from public debate, historians have begun to reevaluate the extent to which such topics were suppressed.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, such as venereal disease prevention during wartime, the perceived risk justified campaigns on issues at the margins of publicly acceptable discourse.

Public health campaigns on a range of subjects have performed social functions beyond their assumed or actual health gains, such as the surveillance and

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<sup>14</sup> On the early history of health education see Elizabeth Toon, "Managing the Conduct of Individual Life: Public Health Education and American Public Health, 1910-1940," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1998). See also Gretchen Marie Krueger, "'For Jimmy and the Boys and Girls of America': Publicizing Childhood Cancers in Twentieth-Century America," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 81, no. 1 (2007); David Cantor, "Uncertain Enthusiasm: The American Cancer Society, Public Education, and the Problems of the Movie, 1921-1960," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 81,1 (2007).

<sup>15</sup> Kelly Joyce, "From Numbers to Pictures: The Development of Magnetic Resonance Imaging and the Visual Turn in Medicine," *Science as Culture* 15, no. 1 (2006). See, for example, Stacie Colwell, "The End of the Road: Gender, the Dissemination of Knowledge, and the American Campaign Against Venereal Disease During World War I," *Camera Obscura* 29 (1993); Elizabeth Fee, "Sin vs. Science: Venereal Disease in Baltimore in the Twentieth Century" *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 43, no. 2 (1988); Michael Imber, "The First World War, Sex Education, and the American Social Hygiene Association's Campaign Against Venereal Disease," *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 16 (1984); Alexandra M. Lord, "'Naturally Clean and Wholesome': Women, Sex Education, and The United States Public Health Service, 1918-1928," *Social History of Medicine* 17 (2004); John Parascandola, "VD at the Movies: PHS Films of the 1930s and 1940s," *Public Health Report* 111, no. 2 (March-April 1996); Suzanne White, "Mom and Dad (1944): Venereal Disease 'Exploitation,'" *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 62 (1988). On breast and cervical cancer, see Robert A. Aronowitz, "Do Not Delay: Breast Cancer and Time, 1900-1970," *The Milbank Quarterly* 79 (2001) and Kristen Gardner, *Early Detection: Women, Cancer, and Awareness Campaigns in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Prominent proponents of the "conspiracy of silence" view include James T. Patterson, *The Dread Disease: Cancer and Modern American Culture*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978). Barbara Clow challenges their interpretation in *Negotiating Disease: Power and Cancer Care, 1900-1950* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill University Press, 2001) and "Who's Afraid of Susan Sontag? Or, the Myths and Metaphors of Cancer Reconsidered," *Social History of Medicine* 14, no. 2 (2001). See also Leslie Reagan, "Engendering the Dread Disease: Women, Men, and Cancer," *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 11 (November 1997).

control of target populations.<sup>17</sup> Within the United States, for example, the physical examination of prostitutes, women dining alone, foreign travelers, and the poor and people of color has been deployed to regulate sexual activity, limit immigration, and justify eugenic policies of sterilization and institutionalization.<sup>18</sup> A product of their times, posters on cancer risk and magazine advertisements warning against the spread of tuberculosis also reveal the race, gender, and class assumptions of their authors. Early twentieth-century public health films about tuberculosis or malaria, for example, commonly blamed immigrants and the poor for the spread of disease.<sup>19</sup> In one of few studies to examine media that circulated beyond national borders, film historian Kirsten Ostherr has shown how fear of contamination by foreign, pathologized bodies shaped the discourse of international health after the Second World War in the films of the World Health Organization and the Communicable Disease Center in the United States (now the Centers for Disease Control).<sup>20</sup> As Ostherr demonstrates, these narratives also made their way into popular culture,

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<sup>17</sup> The classic articulation of this idea is by theorist Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans., Sheridan Smith (Pantheon: New York, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Martin S. Pernick, "Thomas Edison's Tuberculosis Films: Mass Media and Health Propaganda" *Hastings Center Report* 8 (June 1978); Michael E. Teller, *The Tuberculosis Movement: A Public Campaign in the Progressive Era* (New York: Greenwood, 1988); Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public's Health* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997); Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Marianne Fedunki, "Malaria Films: Motion Pictures as a Public Health Tool," *American Journal of Public Health* 93 (2003).

<sup>20</sup> *Cinematic Prophylaxis: Globalization and Contagion in the Discourse of World Health* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), chaps. 2-4.

where “contagion” served as a metaphor for the spread of immigrants, Communism, or sexual permissiveness.<sup>21</sup>

While the materials of public health campaigns have thus been analyzed for the prejudices and assumptions they reveal or perpetuate, few researchers do more than deconstruct the meanings coded within them, as historians Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange have noted. Referring specifically to the subject of sexology, they argue that scholars have too often treated films, posters, marriage manuals, and magazine advice columns “simply as sources of ‘evidence’[;]...rarely has the medium itself been the object of historical enquiry.”<sup>22</sup> Only occasionally have researchers investigated the *production* of such media.

Yet a closer look at the intentions of their creators, the models they drew on, and the assumptions they made about their audiences offers the opportunity to reconsider some of the most significant questions in the history of the birth control movement. Firstly, as I will show, the *mode* of delivery has had a significant impact on the *content* of birth control media. To what extent were the movement’s shifting political strategies shaped, therefore, by media practices? As influential communications theorist Marshall McLuhan proposed in 1964, “the medium is the

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<sup>21</sup> See also Alexandra Minna Stern and Howard Markel. “The Public Health Service and Film Noir: A Look Back at Elia Kazan’s ‘Panic in the Streets (1950).’” *Public Health Reports* 118 (2003).

<sup>22</sup> “Public Pedagogy: Sex Education and Mass Communication in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13 (January, 2004): 71. Groundbreaking work that does explore these sources includes Robert Eberwein’s study of sex education films, *Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999). See also Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government’s Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) and Leslie Reagan, Nancy Tomes and Paula Treichler, eds., *Medicine’s Moving Pictures: Medicine, Health, and Bodies in American Film and Television* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007). Several new studies of medicine’s visual culture are also pending publication: David Serlin, ed., *Imagining Illness: Public Health and Visual Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming); Marsha Orgeron, Devin Orgeron, Dan Streibile, eds., *Learning with the Lights Out: An Educational Film Reader* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2010); Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland, *Useful Cinema* (Duke University Press, forthcoming).

message,” framing media materials and the ways they are understood.<sup>23</sup> Weaving an account of the opportunities and limitations of each of the forms of media with an exploration of the visual and aural techniques birth control advocates employed, I aim to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the history of the birth control movement by demonstrating how their media campaigns informed, rather than simply reflected, their strategies and goals.

Secondly, going beyond a visual or textual analysis of images and scripts sheds light on the question at the heart of much recent scholarship, namely whether the birth control movement intended to empower birth control users or impose their own values upon them. Historians have explored in detail the tension between personal liberty and state power in the provision of birth control and abortion, concluding that supporters of women’s access to contraception have not always had women’s best interests in mind. Carole McCann, for example, describes the campaign to legalize contraception as only a “partial success,” because of paternalistic racial and class assumptions which undermined the movement’s feminist intentions.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst I acknowledge that these factors constricted some women’s access to a complete range of reproductive health services, my research suggests that family planning promoters were convinced of their clients’ desire for contraceptive services and acutely aware of the ethical issues involved in their work. Moreover, among those developing media for family planning in the post-war period, I have observed a divide emerging between those who prioritized the empowerment of their female

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<sup>23</sup> McLuhan explored this idea in his most influential book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>24</sup> *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 21.

clients and others content to leave gender inequalities in place so long as contraceptive use was adopted.

With the birth control movement dominated by white middle-class women and powerful figures in business and politics, the concerns of poor families and people of color were undoubtedly marginalized. Among African Americans, the legacy of white control over black sexuality during slavery as well as coercive and paternalistic clinic practices fostered great distrust of birth control programs well into the late twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Black women also struggled against the pronatalist stance of Black Nationalist leaders to control their own fertility. By the 1960s, women of color, rather than privileging access to abortion as a key reproductive right as did middle-class white women, were more concerned with challenging family planning policies intended to prevent poor women from having children and securing access to prenatal and antenatal care.<sup>26</sup>

Historians have extended their critiques to the post-WWII international context of “population control,” in which American family planning programs expanded overseas. These studies are largely negative assessments of the purported paternalistic, imperialist or racist motivations of the “population controllers” who

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<sup>25</sup> Simone M. Caron, “Birth Control and the Black Community in the 1960s: Genocide or Power Politics?,” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (Spring, 1998). For an account of the sexual exploitation of black women under slavery and in the American South in the twentieth century see Darlene Clark Hine, “Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex” and “Rape and the Inner Lives for Black Women: A Culture of Dissemblance” in *Hine Sight: Black women and the Re-construction of American History* (Indiana University Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States*, 21; Lee Rainwater, assisted by Karol Kane Weinstein, *And the Poor Get Children: Sex, Contraception and Family Planning in the Working Class* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1960); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

focused primarily on the birth rates of people of color.<sup>27</sup> At best, scholars have concluded, white feminists misunderstood the needs of the communities they targeted and collaborated with repressive forces in the movement. As their work has shown, across the international field not all types of contraception were offered to all women, and some were coerced or misled into ending pregnancies, testing new contraceptive technologies with significant side-effects, or undergoing sterilization.

Yet it is important to remember that while some family planning promoters may have been motivated by prejudice, fear of an overpopulated world, or their own self-interest, many others joined the campaign to free women, as in the words of Margaret Sanger, from “sexual slavery.” There is little doubt that women the world over, and men, have sought opportunities to control their own fertility. Their attitudes to family planning programs have differed within various communities and should be understood within their specific contexts. They may also shift over time, and in particular circumstances. Acknowledging this, historians have begun to consider in more detail the complex relationship between the family planning provider and user. As Johanna Schoen concludes in her study of poor women’s access to contraception in the segregated South,

[d]espite the existence of real power differentials between policy makers, public welfare workers, philanthropists, physicians, and the recipients of birth control, no one ever possessed total control, and all participants shaped every outcome in the process of negotiating women’s access to birth control, sterilization, and abortion.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control and Contraceptive Choice* (Boston: South End Press, 1995); Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008);

<sup>28</sup> Johanna Schoen, *Choice & Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15.

Schoen argues that family planning users were not unaware of the race and class prejudices underlying many programs but took advantage of services for their own ends nonetheless. Moreover, while certain reproductive choices may be considered drastic and extreme by some, they have offered affordable, reliable, and discreet protection for others. Laura Briggs' careful study of Catholic Puerto Rico for example, where family planning programs had been undertaken since the 1920s, illustrates that a campaign by mainland feminists to end sterilization in the 1970s limited poor women's access to one of the cheapest contraceptive options available, and one that could have been undertaken without the need for a husband's compliance or permission.<sup>29</sup>

The history of birth control, then, is more complex than simple acquiescence or resistance to the goals of family planning promoters. Accordingly, I argue, the media campaigns I explore here are not in themselves exploitative, but nor are they value-free. While I cannot know the motivations of all of the people involved in the production of these materials, I can reveal some of the discussions behind the scenes that shaped their form and use and complicate existing interpretations of the movement. At an international conference on health education using television and radio in 1980, John Cain of Britain's BBC raised the question central to those involved in the production and dissemination of birth control media, namely whether the role of health communication was to inform people "with a view to encouraging

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<sup>29</sup> Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 73. Even the Dalkon Shield, the intrauterine device that was informally tested on thousands of poor women only to be recalled after causing severe side-effects include sterilization, has been reappraised in an effort to more fully evaluate how women chose this technology and understood the benefits and risks. See Nicole J. Grant, *The Selling of Contraception: The Dalkon Shield Case, Sexuality, and Women's Autonomy* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992).



them to make up their own minds or in the business of persuading and pressuring people to change their way of life.”<sup>30</sup> His query resonates throughout this study.

## Sources and Methods

These media pioneers have left a valuable, but uneven, archive of sources for study. For the first half of the twentieth century, the personal papers of Margaret Sanger and some of her colleagues, as well as the organizational records of Planned Parenthood and its predecessor organizations, offer a wealth of material including correspondence and meeting notes. Film, radio, and television scripts document media strategies and the thinking behind them. Unfortunately, many of the earliest films are lost, although some important examples are preserved at the Library of Congress. Advertisements, reviews, and the comments of critics can help to fill in missing plot details and the look and feel of others, which are richly contextualized by a wide range of examples of Progressive Era filmmaking on social issues.

While the story of media production can be pieced together from such sources, it is much harder to determine the scope of dissemination. Records of film showings at individual movie houses or the broadcast schedules of particular radio stations are hard to find, and where they are available, offer only an incomplete glimpse into one community’s cultural options. Moreover, they tell us little about an audience’s interest in or reactions to particular productions. For this reason the reception of birth control media is left outside the scope of this study. Occasionally, I

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<sup>30</sup> John Cain, “Some Problems Faced by Broadcasters,” in *Health Education by Television and Radio: Contributions to an International Conference with a Selected Bibliography*, ed. Manfred Meyer (München: K.G. Saur, 1981), 26.

have included individual responses to a particular example, where it might aid our understanding of the tone or context of a production. By going beyond an analysis of the content of family planning media to examine the discussions that occurred behind the scenes, however, I can reveal the intentions, assumptions, and strategic decisions that shaped the elements seen in the finished product.

For mid-century, the approaches laid out in radio and television scripts or film proposals, as well as surviving examples of a wide range of films, videos, and other campaign materials, can be related to a growing body of communications literature that informed their production. Journal literature and the internal reports of Planned Parenthood and the International Planned Parenthood Federation held in the archives also provide a sense of the distribution of such materials. From the 1960s, when the international family planning movement took off and media production expanded dramatically, through to the end of my study in the 1980s, these sources allow for a more complete picture of the life cycle of a particular production—including the discussions and activities of “information and education committees,” the shifting theoretical approaches of family planning communications, and in some cases even evaluations of their distribution and impact. In keeping with my focus on the production of birth control media rather than its reception, I have resisted drawing conclusions from the limited evaluations that make a case for the actual success or failure of particular communication methods. Instead of taking such reports at their word I focus on the aims of the media producers and their own understanding of the impact of their work. This approach provides valuable insights into the family

planning community's strategic deployment of media in response to specific historical contexts.

## **Overview of Chapters**

In **Chapter Two** I describe how birth control advocates attempted to publicize the birth control debate by circumventing the Comstock Act in the early decades of the twentieth century. First, they took up the new medium of film. Although they rarely escaped some kind of censorship, the battle to have the films shown formed another part of the media strategy of the movement. With every court case Sanger and her contemporaries gained another opportunity to plead their case. A backlash against sex-related subjects eventually drove the subject out of serious cinema with the introduction of the Hays Code in the 1930s, and so campaigners instead turned to the radio.

Initially struggling to persuade any broadcasters to take up the issue, the birth control movement actually benefited from growing regulation of the radio industry as policies were put in place to protect educational programming. Over the next two decades, they shifted their rhetorical strategies to remain relevant to the changing national priorities of the Great Depression and the Second World War. The Planned Parenthood Federation of America expanded its radio presence significantly during this time and saw great gains for the movement, with the overturning of some of the provisions of the Comstock legislation and the expansion of clinic services around the country. Yet after the war, as families began to settle down in America's burgeoning suburbs, the idea of family planning looked set to fall out of fashion.

**Chapter Three** begins with the postwar work of Planned Parenthood and its use of the radio to promote the idea of an international “population explosion.” The organization was able to justify its existence beyond the wartime emergency by expanding its services to include marital counseling and infertility treatment and cultivating American interest in fertility issues on a global scale. The communications theories developed during the war provided new tools for a growing class of media experts to deploy in this work. Setting their sights on mainstream respectability, birth control advocates also moved their media campaign onto the nation’s television sets where they could promote a wholesome image of the universal value of family planning for all American families, in keeping with the highly conventional representations of family life in other media of this period.

The fear engendered by the idea of worldwide overpopulation, coupled with a growing liberalization of attitudes towards sexuality, helped secure a place for birth control services in the United States. By the 1950s, high-profile prosecutions and police harassment of abortion providers, as well as the tragic consequences of illegal operations, had convinced many in the medical profession of the need to reform abortion law.<sup>31</sup> In the 1960s, the birth control movement began to apply its media savvy to the cause of abortion legalization. Although feminist lobbying was successful in overturning the ban on abortion, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 intensified the so-called culture wars between liberal and right-wing groups in the United States. As historian Donald Critchlow notes, “[o]ne of the great

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<sup>31</sup> Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (California: University of California Press, 1998) provides a comprehensive account of the history of illegal abortion. See also James Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy, 1800-1900* (Oxford University Press, 1980).

ironies of the success of abortion reform was that it shattered bipartisan support for federal family planning policy and helped take population control off the presidential agenda.”<sup>32</sup> Abortion opponents took note of some of the lessons of media influence and began to develop their own materials. This chapter concludes with the emergence of anti-abortion media and its legacy for the family planning movement.

In **Chapter Four** I return to the immediate post-war period to explore the internationalization of family planning. As the notion of a global population explosion took hold, the American government began to fund efforts in other countries. Birth control advocates, who had long provided information and services in other countries, could now dramatically expand their work outside the United States. The boon in funding, coupled with the growth of communications theory since its wartime deployment, led to the rapid expansion of the emerging field of “health communication.” As I describe in this chapter, the development, use, and evaluation of family planning media became its central area of focus and helped to establish the field as a whole.

Transposing the successes of American birth control media to various international contexts proved extremely challenging, however. As I explore, communications experts gradually realized that materials developed for one context were of little use in another. Moreover, assumptions about the lack of audience sophistication and over-confidence in the power of “superior” media technologies to sway audiences unfamiliar with them led to dramatic failures. The problems led some in the field to question the vast amounts of money being devoted to media

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<sup>32</sup> Critchlow, *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 149.

communications. Others blamed the particular approach, instead advocating a grassroots strategy based on local or “folk” media styles and more engagement with the target community’s own perceptions of their contraceptive needs.<sup>33</sup>

Early in the 1970s, the concept of overpopulation was largely discredited within the United States because of reports that the country had achieved replacement fertility levels. The rise of conservative and religious opposition to sexual equality and the growth of the anti-abortion movement also made government participation in family planning unpopular. Political controversies at home influenced the activities of U.S. organizations overseas in the 1980s, which saw declining funding from USAID for family planning programs. In **Chapter Five** I examine the impact of this shift. As a result, more and more countries took over the production of their own family planning media. While Americans had never been the sole contributors they had certainly dominated the field in the past, and indeed many communications specialists in the international movement had received their training from American specialists. The most important breakthroughs, however, were made “in the field” when media producers on the ground discovered the most effective ways to tailor their materials for local audiences. It was this context that produced one of the world’s most successful soap operas on the subject of family planning, in Mexico. Developed by television producer Miguel Sabido, *Accompañe Me* became a model for health communication media. I end the chapter with a discussion of its impact on the use of media for family planning specifically, and for health communication more generally.

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<sup>33</sup> I use the term “folk media” to refer to indigenous, traditional media genres as opposed to the high-technology formats of film, radio, and television, just as the phrase was used by family planning promoters. I recognize, however, that this language exaggerates differences between the two types, and conveys the idea that traditional media forms were less sophisticated, when in fact, most media strategies drew on older storytelling conventions and styles of communication.

In the **Conclusion** I look back over the history I have recounted to consider the connections between the various media discussed in each chapter as well as their legacies for the family planning movement and health communication. The material blurred the boundaries between advertising, propaganda, entertainment, and education. Designed by people without a background in medicine, and usually prohibited from including any specific means of contraception, they were less technical than health education campaign materials. Instead, they often borrowed the strategies of dramatic media to deliver their message with an emotional impact. In their introduction to *Medicine's Moving Pictures: Medicine, Health, and Bodies in American Film and Television*, the editors write that “the medical profession has been the single most important constituency influencing and patrolling media renditions of health subjects, and has effectively shaped popular and public definitions of health, medicine, and disease.”<sup>34</sup> While this accurately describes most of the field, it does not hold true for the arena of reproductive health. As this dissertation will show, since the very beginning of the twentieth-century campaign to legalize birth control, non-medical advocates have used mass media to frame the topic of contraception for a broad audience.<sup>35</sup> Their efforts, and sometimes the work of their opponents, have helped to shape the debate over birth control at home and around the world.

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<sup>34</sup> Leslie Reagan, Nancy Tomes and Paula Treicher, eds. *Medicine's Moving Pictures: Medicine, Health, and Bodies in American Film and Television* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Historian Kirsten Gardner has recently shown that early in the twentieth century, lay women were also an influential force in the development and dissemination of health messages about breast and cervical cancer, *Early Detection*, chap. 2. The women's health movement and AIDS activism in the late twentieth century are more recent examples of such activities.

## Chapter 2: Battling Silence and Censorship

*As a propagandist, I see immense advantages in being gagged. It silences me, but it makes millions of others talk about me, and the cause in which I live.*

—Margaret Sanger, 1929<sup>1</sup>

Publicity lay at the heart of Margaret Sanger's approach during the early days of the campaign to legalize birth control. She considered "agitation through violation of the law" the vital first step in a long-term strategy.<sup>2</sup> Despite the prohibitions of the 1873 Comstock legislation banning the dissemination of contraceptive information, manufacturers had continued to advertise methods to prevent and end pregnancy under the euphemism "female hygiene," but because the illegal trade was unregulated, customers ran the risk of purchasing ineffective or even dangerous products.<sup>3</sup> Although Sanger was publicly dismissive of these black market peddlers,

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<sup>1</sup> Sanger, Ford Hall Forum Speech, Apr. 16, 1929, quoted in Rochelle Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence: A History of America's Cultural and Legal Struggles over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998), 108. Sanger appeared on stage with a white gag over her mouth and handed her speech to historian Arthur Schlesinger to read, to draw attention to the mayoral ban that prohibited her from speaking publicly on the subject of birth control in Boston.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Sanger, *Birth Control: The Proceedings of the First American Birth Control Conference* (New York, 1922), 91-92 cited in James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society Since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 102-103.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), chap. 2. Tone has taken issue with historians who characterize the years between 1873 and the launch of Margaret Sanger's campaign in the 1910s as a time of complete suppression. She coined the term "grey market" to refer to the industry of contraceptives materials sold under names that only vaguely implied their purpose despite the ongoing legal ban, through to the 1930s when a mass market for contraception took off.



privately she supported their work.<sup>4</sup> The movement's first challenge was to get the subject out into the open, and any kind of media coverage helped achieve this.

Her own campaign began in print in 1914, when she deliberately challenged the Comstock law by publishing a pamphlet on *Family Limitation*. After flinging down the gauntlet, Sanger left for Europe to avoid prosecution, but upon Anthony Comstock's death she returned to the United States. On October 6, 1916, with her sister Ethel Byrne and colleague Fania Mindell, she opened the first birth control clinic in America, in Brooklyn, New York. Nine days later the clinic was raided by police and the three founders were arrested—an outcome that Sanger had not only anticipated but deliberately provoked.

Birth control advocates became increasingly adept at manipulating the nation's media so that their frequent clashes with the legal system kept the issue in the newspapers. Emma Goldman, a leading member of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as well as a birth control advocate, urged Sanger not to plead guilty in order to prevent her trial from being quickly concluded and thus lose out on an opportunity to attract publicity. On numerous occasions IWW members had used a similar strategy. Goldman wrote to Sanger in December 1917 that thanks to the newspaper coverage of the high-profile case, "the birth control question has taken hold of the public as never before."<sup>5</sup> The three women arrested at the clinic were convicted and Sanger served thirty days in jail. The media frenzy that had surrounded

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<sup>4</sup> Amy Sarch, "Dirty Discourse: Birth Control Advertising in the 1920s and 1930s," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1994), chap. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Goldman, letter to Sanger, 7 December 1917, Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, cited in Joan M. Gaulard, "Woman Rebel: The Rhetorical Strategies of Margaret Sanger and the American Birth Control Movement, 1912-1938," Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1978), 41.

their arrest continued during their incarceration, with newspapers giving particular coverage to a hunger strike undertaken by Fania Mindell. Sanger's newsletter, *The Birth Control Review*, also reported on these events and regularly published letters from women seeking information about contraceptive methods. Many of the women who wrote in noted that they had read about Sanger's work in the press, confirming the important role of the mass media in publicizing and building support for the movement.<sup>6</sup>

### **“Pictures with a Purpose”<sup>7</sup>**

The Comstock statute applied only to the dissemination of “lewd materials” through the mail and across state lines, leaving film, developed later, beyond its purview. The motion picture could also reach a far larger and less literate audience than mailed books or pamphlets on the subject of “family limitation.” Calls by Progressive reformers for the “repeal of reticence” to allow them to take on social problems such as prostitution and venereal disease resulted in a growing public discourse on sexual issues that paved the way for birth control films. In 1905, New York physician Prince Morrow launched the social hygiene movement to tackle syphilis and gonorrhea. The campaign intensified after the discovery of a successful treatment for syphilitic disease in 1909, and in 1913 audiences heard the word “syphilis” in theatres for the first time, with the New York production of Eugene

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, “Would Rather Die,” *The Birth Control Review*, December 1918, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Advertisement for *Mother, I Need You*. *Variety*, 13 September 1918, 46.

Brieux's play *Damaged Goods*. This new openness was summed up by an article in the monthly periodical *Current Opinion* declaring the time "sex o'clock" in America.<sup>8</sup>

Issue-focused filmmakers responded to the shift with motion pictures across a broad range of formerly taboo subjects. Physicians and health organizations including the American Cancer Society and the National Tuberculosis Association turned to the new medium to promote health. The 1914 film version of the play *Damaged Goods* launched a subgenre of "sex hygiene" films to address sexually transmitted disease. Looking to exploit the reach of the motion picture to present their views and the reform arguments of the day, others explored labor disputes, drug trafficking, and women's suffrage, as well as more controversial topics including eugenics and vivisection.<sup>9</sup> Filmmakers specializing in message films vied for audiences with others simply cashing in on the trend for controversial topics with "white slavery" films of sensationalized stories about the abduction of young women for prostitution.

This booming industry, along with concern over the influence of the motion picture, quickly stirred calls for censorship from anti-obscenity reformers. Between 1908 and 1934, film industry leaders imposed their own guidelines as a way to stave off state or federal regulation. In 1909, filmmakers launched the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, which became the "unofficial clearinghouse" for new

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<sup>8</sup> Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence*, chap. 4; Allan Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); *Current Opinion* 55, no. 2 (August 1913), 113-114.

<sup>9</sup> Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: The Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 5; Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), chap. 3; Martin Pernick, "More than Illustrations: Early Twentieth-Century Health Films as Contributors to the Histories of Medicine and of Motion Pictures" and Susan Lederer, "Hollywood and Human Experimentation: Representing Medical Research in Popular Film," both in Leslie Reagan, Nancy Tomes and Paula Treichler, eds., *Medicine's Moving Pictures: Medicine, Health, and Bodies in American Film and Television* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007).

films over the next few decades.<sup>10</sup> This strategy of internal regulation was initially successful and filmmakers continued making movies on marginal topics, although motion pictures gradually came under increasing scrutiny as state, and later, national, censorship boards were established.

The first pictures to address the idea of controlling reproduction focused on abortion. Despite the successful effort to criminalize abortion in the late nineteenth century led by the medical profession, by the early twentieth century pregnant women and their partners still generally viewed the renewal of menstruation, (as early abortion was referred to) as acceptable, and they found plenty of physicians as well as other practitioners willing to oblige them.<sup>11</sup> Films, however, commonly represented the illegal practice as the whim of financially secure young women who chose frivolous desires over motherhood, dramatizing President Theodore Roosevelt's critique of self-indulgent Anglo-Saxon women risking "race suicide" by avoiding their duty to reproduce. Roosevelt attacked birth control on the grounds that the "viciousness, coldness, shallow-heartedness" of selfish childless women would lead white Protestant Americans to be overrun by inferior peoples.<sup>12</sup> He based his argument on the declining birthrate among Native-born Americans and increasing immigration, especially from Eastern Europe, drawing on eugenic theory which blamed crime and delinquency on reproduction by the "unfit," meaning the poor,

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<sup>10</sup> Originally the New York Board of Motion Picture Censorship but soon renamed to avoid association with censorship. Quote from National Board of Review, "History," <http://www.nbrmp.org/about/history.cfm> (accessed 7 August 2008).

<sup>11</sup> The procedure was only permitted if a physician determined it necessary to save the mother's life. Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (California: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 142. See also Roosevelt's "Race Decadence," *The Outlook*, 8 April 1911, 764-767.

disabled, and criminal.<sup>13</sup> This discourse was not an exclusively white preoccupation. W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the first black public figures to support birth control, advocated it as a mechanism for racial progress if wisely used by the “Talented Tenth” of African Americans.<sup>14</sup> Other black intellectuals, including Marcus Garvey, fiercely disagreed however, opposing the limitation of fertility on religious and nationalist grounds.<sup>15</sup>

Filmmakers were able to circumvent the usual strictures against the dramatization of controversial issues by framing their films as “pictures with a purpose”—entertaining melodramas with a moral lesson or social message.<sup>16</sup> By making clear distinctions between villains and victims and providing plot resolutions that rewarded moral decisions and punished sins, pictures with a purpose satisfied the censors and honored the melodramatic format of narrative storytelling that dominated cinema by this time.<sup>17</sup> *Mother I Need You* (1918), for example, tells the story of a young woman who was drugged and taken advantage of. After her abortion, her doctor is indicted, but he is pardoned when the truth about the young woman’s

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<sup>13</sup> Laura Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), chaps. 4-6. Although eugenicists supported the use of birth control among the lower classes, they were allied with other conservatives against its widespread availability for all families. Margaret Sanger rejected the idea of denying the rich birth control and disagreed with some of the class and race prejudices of eugenicists, but she did try to align with the field to help promote her cause. Yet before its reputation began to decline in the 1920s, its most influential academics and scientists were loath to be associated with Sanger because of her controversial (and highly-publicized) activities. Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 195-198, 216-217.

<sup>14</sup> Jamie Hart, “Who Should Have the Children? Discussions of Birth Control among African-American Intellectuals, 1920-1939,” *The Journal of Negro History* 79, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>15</sup> Jessie M. Rodrique, “The Black Community and the Birth Control Movement,” in Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons with Robert A. Padgug, eds., *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Advertisement from *Variety*, 13 September 1918, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 56.

victimization comes out.<sup>18</sup> Film historian Eric Schaefer has identified five major character types that appeared in early sex hygiene films: the innocent, the corrupter, the charlatan, the crusader, and the parent.<sup>19</sup> In *Mother, I Need You*, the victim, Eva, and her seducer clearly fit the first two categories, while the physician who performs the illegal abortion is the charlatan, and the district attorney is the crusader who works to expose his actions. The selfish woman Roosevelt singled out for criticism appears so frequently in films featuring abortion that I am adding her to Schaefer's list of types: "the refuser," as I am calling her, denies her natural mothering instincts but is later redeemed when she realizes her folly.<sup>20</sup>

Without any formal criteria for determining the educational value of a film, censors and reviewers made their own evaluations. In this case, a writer in *Moving Picture World* concluded that the warning carried by the storyline legitimized the risqué narrative since, "despite its rather repellant plot, [the film] has a certain message of value and interest."<sup>21</sup> Reviewers frequently took the opportunity to clarify their own moral standing on the abortion issue by commending actors and actresses who took on such "unsympathetic" roles.

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<sup>18</sup> *Mother, I Need You* a.k.a. *The Curse of Eve*, Corona Cinema Company, October 1917. Film description from AFI Catalog.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 30-31. At a time when the status of physicians was rising, venereal disease storylines drew a distinction between the reliable professional doctor who should be consulted for treatment and advice, and the quack or charlatan who engaged in criminal activity.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, *The Question* (1916), Equitable Motion Pictures Corp., 21 Feb 1916. Film description from AFI Catalog, <http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:107033> (accessed 7 August 2008). Grace ignores the pleas of her husband who wants to start a family, and instead has an abortion. As a consequence, her husband has an affair. The couple later adopts, and the child turns out to be the product of the husband's affair. The All Movie Guide database plot synopsis describes a different ending to the film, in which the husband dies, leaving Grace to raise her adopted child alone. It is not clear from the sources I have located if Grace adopts because she has become infertile, although this would fit with the tendency of this genre to punish the character of the selfish woman with infertility for delaying motherhood.

<sup>21</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 27 October 1917, 522.

Far from putting women off, these proscriptive narratives held some appeal for female viewers. As audiences flocked to the cinema, women were especially likely to show a special interest in “women’s issues.”<sup>22</sup> Movie theaters were part of an emerging culture of public activity which along with department stores, amusement parks and the international exposition, held a special appeal for women unaccustomed to such freedoms.<sup>23</sup> As well as inviting them into darkened spaces occupied by men, the cinema brought sexuality further into the public domain in portrayals of fallen women and prostitutes. These films depicted an unprecedented display of female sexual agency, yet at the same time were laden with moral lessons circumscribing women’s sexual activity.<sup>24</sup>

### **Promoting Birth Control on the Big Screen**

Films about abortion drew on familiar moral codes and represented sexually active women in a negative light. With the advent of films favoring birth control, however, audiences were introduced to more positive portrayals of women who advocated female perspectives on the issue.<sup>25</sup> Early in 1917 the *New York Dramatic Mirror* declared that birth control had the Midwest “in its grip” and listed four films (of at least ten in circulation) showing in theaters in the region.<sup>26</sup> Birth control advocates seized the chance to insert their perspective into the growing debate on

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<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times*, 5 Dec 1920, 99.

<sup>23</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), chaps. 5-7.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Eberwein, *Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 57.

<sup>26</sup> 10 February 1917, 14.

controlling reproduction. As one of the most well-respected directors in Hollywood at the time, Lois Weber was free to make a range of socially-oriented films; previously she had tackled temperance and capital punishment. *Where Are My Children?* (1917) became the first of two of her films to promote birth control.<sup>27</sup> The “square-up,” an argument at the beginning of a film justifying its content, suggests that the subject of the film is one of “serious public interest,” making the case that cinema should enjoy the same right as other mass media to explore current issues:

Newspapers, magazines, and books have treated different phases of this question. Can a subject thus dealt with on the printed page be denied careful dramatization on the motion picture screen? The Universal Film Mfg. Company believes not.<sup>28</sup>

Despite this assertion, the question of whether motion pictures were an appropriate venue for the same topics discussed in the nation’s newspapers was far from resolved. In the Supreme Court case of *Mutual Film Corp. v Ohio* (1915), the lawyer for Mutual Film argued that movies should be protected from censorship under the provisions of free speech, as they constituted filmed versions of the same issues written about in the country’s newspapers and magazines. Although this reasoning was frequently repeated over the coming years, it was rejected by the court, which argued instead that there are “some things which should not have pictorial representation in public places.”<sup>29</sup> The justices denied film the protection of free speech on the grounds that filmmaking was a primarily an entertainment business, not

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<sup>27</sup> American print viewed at the Library of Congress. Universal, 5 reels. There are two extant but incomplete versions of the film: the American one described here, and a European version. Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Sex, Violence, Crime: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era* (University of California Press, 1992), 53-54.

<sup>28</sup> Schaefer describes the importance of the “square-up” in films dealing with controversial topics. *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 69-71.

<sup>29</sup> Garth S. Jowett, “A Capacity for Evil: The 1915 Supreme Court *Mutual* Decision,” in *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, ed. Matthew Bernstein (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 27.



an educational enterprise, despite the number of filmmakers producing films with a social or health message.<sup>30</sup> The decision granted states and municipalities the power to censor films and ushered in a patchwork of censorship boards with a variety of standards across the country.

Universal was so concerned about possible censorship they apparently delayed the release of *Where Are My Children?*, although they may also have played up this possibility for publicity. *The Washington Post* acknowledged that the film dealt with delicate subject matter but concluded that it was “far from offensive.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, there were few attempts to prevent the movie from being shown. One factor in its favor was that the storyline did not advocate birth control in general, but specifically for large families who had no means to support more children, and to prevent the birth of “defective” children.

The plot involves two storylines. Mrs. Walton, a classic example of the “refuser” figure, has had several abortions to avoid giving up her busy social life for motherhood. Her husband, District Attorney Richard Walton, is an advocate of eugenics and birth control who desperately wants children. In the first part of the narrative, Richard has to prosecute a physician for giving information on contraception to poor patients, despite his own support for the practice. In the second narrative, he brings a case against an abortionist, Dr. Malfit, and discovers his own wife has visited the doctor repeatedly. Richard returns home and accuses her of murder. By the time Mrs. Walton realizes the error of her ways, it is too late for her to fulfill the ideal of womanhood by becoming a mother. She has become sterile, a

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movie* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>31</sup> 2 June 1916.

narrative solution to punish her for aborting her previous pregnancies. The film ends with a moving scene of regret as the couple sit by the fire and imagine the children they never had.

Weber mollified censors by attacking abortion while promoting birth control. Some reviewers were confused by this tactic or considered it a misstep, even though denouncing abortion was in keeping with the strategies of the birth control movement. Referring to Richard Walton's accusation that his wife was a murderer, a reviewer sympathetic to the cause wrote, "[I]f Mrs. Walton was guilty of a crime, then her husband lent his influence in the making of many other criminals. In appealing for sympathy the authors lost sight of the most important significance of their theme," namely, the impact of the Comstock Law on people with good intentions.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as one reviewer acknowledged, wealthy women already had access to birth control information from their physicians: "The whole purpose of a campaign of the kind being waged by Mrs. Sanger and Emma Goldman is to place the same means within the reach of the less fortunate."<sup>33</sup>

The double narrative also opened the way for promoters to highlight different aspects of the issue for their target audiences. An advertisement in the *New York Times* described the film as "humanity's most powerful weapon against the premeditated destruction of the unborn," while other write-ups emphasized the race suicide argument or pro-birth control storyline.<sup>34</sup> In fact, censorship could result in very different versions of the film being played in various locations around the country. As Weber noted:

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<sup>32</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 29 April 1916, 818.

<sup>33</sup> Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> 27 September 1916, 9.

In my native state of Pennsylvania the entire first part of the play was excised by the censors. The scenes in the slums, and all the incidents going to prove that under certain circumstances birth control was justifiable, were entirely cut out, and any believer in birth control who happened to see the play in that state would not give me any credit for stating their cause at all.<sup>35</sup>

The Supreme Feature Film Service, which held rights to the film in some states, unsuccessfully challenged the Pennsylvania censors on the grounds that the topic was “a subject upon which hundreds of volumes have been written, [and upon which] eminent men like Theodore Roosevelt and many others have vented opinions.”<sup>36</sup> Of course Roosevelt had decried birth control, not promoted it.

Despite the controversy, or perhaps because of it, *Where Are My Children?* was a huge success, described as “one of the most remarkable preachments yet filmed.”<sup>37</sup> For the most part, the educational message reassured censors, while the entertainment value appealed to audiences. The film was also positively reviewed by film critics, thanks to the expert blending of these two elements. Margaret Sanger and her colleagues were apparently less enthusiastic. In an interview in *The Overland Monthly*, Weber noted that the American Birth Control League would have preferred all the emphasis on the first part of the story without the second storyline about abortion. Because the film gave more time to the narrative about Mrs. Walton’s behavior, the picture was seen by some as another argument against race suicide and by implication, against birth control.

Abortion storylines had already proven their popularity, and perhaps Weber hoped that this strategy would maximize the reach of her message. At the same time,

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<sup>35</sup> “Lois Weber Smalley,” *The Overland Monthly* 68:3 (September 1916), 200.

<sup>36</sup> *Motion Picture News*, 7 October 1916, 2206.

<sup>37</sup> “Notable Film Play Booked by Georgian,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 5 November 1916, B3.

of course, it would increase profits, although she argued that commercial success did not motivate her decision to include both narratives. Acknowledging that the film “would not entirely satisfy an ardent propagandist,” Weber argued that birth control advocates would prefer a picture that only those already interested in the topic would ever go and see.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, a reviewer in *Moving Picture World* criticized Weber for not using the more “straightforward” approach to birth control proselytizing favored by Sanger and Emma Goldman. These two influential figures in the movement had yet to use film for their cause, although Sanger would herself take up the medium a year later.

**“An Honest Birth Control Film at Last!”<sup>39</sup>**

Up to this point, filmmakers had framed their propaganda in melodramatic narratives, drawing on the key arguments for and against birth control circulating in public discourse. Referencing the idea of race suicide among the rich, films opposing family limitation depicted selfish women who drove their husbands away by refusing to have children. Films favoring birth control, including *The Laws of Population* and *Where Are My Children?* focused on the needs of the *poorer* classes, and on the eugenic value of preventing the “unfit” from having children. These films contributed to the growing dialogue on the topic. But before Sanger joined in, the link between these movies and the birth control movement had not been explicitly drawn. The next step was to connect audiences with the activists who led the campaign.

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<sup>38</sup> “Lois Weber Smalley,” *The Overland Monthly* 68:3 (September 1916), 200.

<sup>39</sup> *Birth Control Review* 1:3 (April-May 1917), 11.

Before her incarceration in 1914, Margaret Sanger had already begun working on a film, no doubt emboldened by the growing number on the topic.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, insisted the *Birth Control Review*, there was room for another depiction of the issues because several films, including Weber's pro-birth control film *Where Are My Children?*, misused the theme of birth control as a vehicle for the story of abortion.<sup>41</sup> Yet Sanger's film, *Birth Control*, which was finally released in 1917, was not as readily embraced by exhibitors as these previous films.<sup>42</sup> The *Review* contrasted their willingness to show these "profitable films which cater to the powers that be by deceiving the public as to the real meaning of birth control," with their timidity regarding the one "genuine" birth control film on the market. Given her notoriety, Sanger's personal involvement in the cause ensured that the film would attract special scrutiny from censors, and no doubt this contributed to exhibitors' reluctance to show the film alongside others on the topic of controlling reproduction.

The film also departed from previous productions by drawing explicitly on real events. Sanger emphasized the reality of the birth control crisis by dividing the film into two parts: an interview in which she described joining the movement juxtaposed with scenes of deprivation among large, poor families, followed by a dramatization of her fight to change the law. She also exploited her notoriety to promote the movie in publicity materials, vowing in an accompanying "certificate of

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<sup>40</sup> Kay Sloan also suggests she was inspired by her friend John Reed's use of a play in New Jersey to promote labor union activities. *The Loud Silents*, 87.

<sup>41</sup> *Birth Control Review* 1, no. 3 (April-May 1917), 10.

<sup>42</sup> April 1917, Message Photo-Play Company, 5 Reels. Although the film is presumed lost, historian Martin Norden has reconstructed the content from a legal transcript held in the papers of Margaret Sanger at Smith College, in "Reproductive Freedom, Revisionist History, Restricted Cinema: The Strange Case of Margaret Sanger and *Birth Control*," in *Cultural Sutures: Medicine and Media*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004).

genuineness” that this was the only film on the topic that she would appear in and linking it to the movement, stating that part of the profits would go toward the cause.

As the star of *Birth Control*, Sanger deployed the medium’s visual power to project an image of herself as the embodiment of the movement. Audiences in this era tended to regard film representations of actual situations as more reliable and authentic than newspaper accounts, and Sanger took full advantage of this to counter her characterization as an extremist by the press.<sup>43</sup> Moving away from her socialist and working-class roots she presented a contrasting image to her radical counterpart, immigrant Jewish activist Emma Goldman.<sup>44</sup> Sanger’s whiteness and middle-class appearance marked her as more reasonable, with her demure demeanor and slight frame distinctly different from the images of Goldman circulating at the time. As one reviewer commented in *Variety*, Sanger appeared as a “placid, clear-eyed, rather young and certainly attractive propagandist that swayed crowds at her meetings and defied the police both before and after her incarceration.”<sup>45</sup> One advertisement for the film featured a still that played on this image to illustrate the severity of the law against birth control [figure 1]. The scene shows a diminutive Sanger surrounded by a top-hatted public official and policemen while being handcuffed. The juxtaposition between the uniformed guards and their fragile female captive concisely conveys the sense that Sanger’s punishment had been far too severe. As the central woman

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<sup>43</sup> On audience belief in film see Sonya Michel, “Taking Risks for Pictures: The Heroics of Cinematic Realism in World War I,” in *Borderlines: Genders and Identities in Peace and War*, ed. Billie Melman (Routledge, 1998), 145; On Sanger’s publicity see Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> At this time Jewish Americans were the targets of anti-immigrant sentiment from critics of race suicide among the Native-born. See Karen Brodtkin, *How the Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), chap. 1. Although Sanger was born working-class, she moved in professional circles by this time and had married into money.

<sup>45</sup> Sloan, *The Loud Silents*, 87.

pictured, she represents the brave challenger to the powerful men who would enslave women in perpetual childbearing.



Figure 1: Film still showing Margaret Sanger's arrest as portrayed in the motion picture *Birth Control*. Credit: *Birth Control Review*, 1917.

*Birth Control* opens with a double exposure of superimposed images contrasting a poor mother struggling to cope and a wealthier woman who has the money to find out how to limit her family size.<sup>46</sup> In an interview interspersed with scenes from the slums, Sanger summarizes her conversion to the birth control cause, when she and a physician attended the home of a woman who was suffering complications after an abortion. As they left, the patient begged the doctor for the

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<sup>46</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 21 April 1917, 451.

information that would allow her to prevent future pregnancies, but he would not divulge it. Appalled at his callous response, Sanger became an advocate for birth control.<sup>47</sup>

At the time, most physicians wanted nothing to do with the birth control movement and railed against those women demanding greater control over their fertility as part of their campaign for education and work opportunities alongside men. When patients asked for advice on preventing conception, doctors counseled one another to consider “the difference between the dragged-out woman on the verge of consumption... and the society belle who mistakenly thinks she does not want babies when every fiber of her being is crying out for this means of bringing her back to healthy thought.”<sup>48</sup> Physicians concurred with other critics, that wealthy women should be at home fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers, not contributing to the decline of the race. They also saw birth control as an underhanded way to avoid the penalties of immoral sexual activity such as venereal disease or pregnancy out of wedlock.

Sanger’s conversion narrative takes aim at the medical profession, while the scenes portraying weak and disabled children and overwhelmed mothers draw on eugenic arguments. The storyline goes further to suggest that upper-class families withhold knowledge of the methods of controlling fertility in order to maintain the

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<sup>47</sup> Sanger repeated this narrative throughout her career, likely a composite of many experiences rather than one singular moment. It is interesting to note that in the usual telling of the story, the woman is a European Jewish immigrant, Sadie Sachs. The film recasts the martyr as an Anglo-American named Helen Fields.

<sup>48</sup> The Editorial Staff of the Alkaloida Clinic, *Sexual Hygiene* (Chicago, 1902), 184, cited in Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, 43.



poor “as the servant and laboring classes.”<sup>49</sup> This narrative strategy antagonized the Commissioner of Licenses for the City of New York, George H. Bell, who served as a film censor, on the grounds it would “promote class hatred.”<sup>50</sup> When he threatened to revoke the license of theaters showing the film, the public debut was cancelled, and instead, the film was shown to a private audience of about 200 supporters. On June 6 Sanger received a temporary injunction allowing the debut screening, with the decision based, in part, on the film’s lack of instruction on actual birth control methods. Message Photoplay Company, the film’s producer, tried to secure a permanent injunction from the Appellate Division, the state’s highest court, but the justices reversed the injunction and sided in favor of Commissioner Bell. The court argued that the film was liable to engender a desire to obtain illegal contraceptive information.<sup>51</sup> This was, of course, one of its goals, described explicitly in publicity materials as the intention “to create public sentiment in favor of the repeal of the [Comstock] statute.”<sup>52</sup>

## The Limits of Propaganda

Sanger’s struggle to overcome the law was again depicted on the big screen in a second Lois Weber production released a month later, *The Hand That Rocks the*

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<sup>49</sup> Edward de Grazia and Roger K. Newman, *Banned Films: Movies, Censors and the First Amendment* (New York: Bowker, 1982), 187.

<sup>50</sup> Sloan, *The Loud Silents*, 88.

<sup>51</sup> Cynthia Goldstein, “Early Film Censorship: Margaret Sanger, *Birth Control*, and the Law,” in *Current Research in Film, Audiences, Economics, and Law, Volume 4*, ed. Bruce A. Austin (Norwood: Ablex, 1988).

<sup>52</sup> Quote from the film’s distributor, Message Photo-Play Company, in de Grazia and Newman, *Banned Films*, 187.

*Cradle* (1917).<sup>53</sup> It is likely that the success of her first film on the topic as well as her support for birth control prompted Weber to start working on another production even before Sanger's film was released. Begun before the furor surrounding *Birth Control* erupted, the storyline similarly courted controversy by echoing Sanger's conversion narrative. Weber plays the wife of a physician who decides to distribute contraceptive information when her husband refuses to break the law to do so, and ends up in court. The square-up contains a note from Weber saying that she purposely avoided showing slums or the heights of affluence to instead represent her intended audience, "the general public." Despite this comment, perhaps made in response to objections that *Birth Control* promoted class warfare, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* again compared the hardships of poor large families with the more comfortable lives of smaller, richer ones.

Reviewers found little reason for censorship, and one writer noted that in fact, all the publicity only added to the attention the film received.<sup>54</sup> Even so, Commissioner Bell banned the film in New York on the grounds that it inflamed the controversy over Margaret Sanger's arrest; clearly he had caught on to the strategy Weber and Sanger were employing to keep their subject in the news. As the National Board of Review acknowledged, the film "opens up for the discussion the problem whether or not a change is needed in the existing law regulating the dissemination of birth control."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 13 May 1917, Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 6 reels. This film is presumed lost. Description from *Moving Picture World*, 2 June 1917, 1508.

<sup>54</sup> *Variety*, 18 May 1917, 26.

<sup>55</sup> "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle," National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, 1907-1971, Box 104, New York Public Library (New York, NY).

*The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* also suffered from bad reviews. Weber sacrificed the dramatic sophistication for which she was famous in order to proselytize. Unlike her previous production, which successfully blended drama with propaganda, the entertainment value of *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* was apparently undermined by its labored focus on the arguments for birth control. One reviewer, describing it as “a preachment, not a play,” asserted that propaganda films should not be shown in places intended primarily “for amusement and recreation.”<sup>56</sup>

The standard of film entertainment was rising dramatically at the time, as studios released increasingly complex and visually rich productions such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and despite some support for topics such as birth control, critics still expected pictures with a purpose to be as captivating as any others. Sanger’s film had broken the convention of framing birth control films in fictional storylines by drawing on her own campaign and arrest, essentially introducing what would later be seen as documentary elements. When Weber followed suit, she abandoned some of her aesthetic principles to make an overtly propagandistic picture. Reviewers were, apparently, beginning to question such blatantly didactic use of the cinema. Audiences, however, seemed to be more enthusiastic; in New York viewers applauded an intertitle that read “If the lawmakers had to bear children they would change the laws.”<sup>57</sup>

Birth control films had made an impact, and box office success was soon followed by a legal breakthrough. In 1918, just one year after motion pictures on the topic had “gripped the nation,” the New York Court of Appeals expanded the

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<sup>56</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 2 June 1917, 1458.

<sup>57</sup> *Motion Picture News*, 2 June 1917, 3462.

exemption allowing physicians to prescribe contraception for the cure and prevention of disease. This paved the way for physician-run birth control clinics, and in 1923 Sanger launched the Clinical Research Bureau (renamed the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in 1928), which dispensed contraception and collected data on its use. From this point on, publicity would help secure the launch of clinics around the country.<sup>58</sup> Sanger and Weber had raised questions about the legal restrictions against contraception by dramatizing the legal battle for birth control. Heavy-handed censorship then afforded them the opportunity to extend the fight, generating more press coverage through the battle to have both movies shown. The struggle to change the laws against the movies thus stood in for the larger campaign to change the laws against all birth control information.

Over the next few years, the movement's successes and audience fatigue from message films contributed to a backlash.<sup>59</sup> *The House Without Children* (1919), based on a play first produced at the height of pro-birth control films in 1917, was an obvious attack on the campaign.<sup>60</sup> A character, significantly named Margaret, argues for birth control while her husband longs for a son. The wife eventually gives up her aversion to motherhood and the couple goes on to have two children. Reinforcing the film's pronatalist message, a theater in Washington, DC, promoted a "better babies" event during the run of the movie [figure 2]. Similar contests were held across the country in the early decades of the twentieth century to showcase healthy and happy

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<sup>58</sup> Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>59</sup> It is likely that the existing films were still shown several years after their original release. In 1924, *Where Are My Children?* was still being advertized in Richmond, Virginia. See Melissa Dawn Ooten, "Screen Strife: Race, Gender, and Movie Censorship in the New South, 1922-1965," (Ph.D. diss., The College of William and Mary, 2005), 220.

<sup>60</sup> Argus Enterprises, Inc., 6-7 reels. Description from AFI Catalog. Based on a play by Robert H. McLaughlin.

children born to parents who were “fit to marry” and reproduce.<sup>61</sup> The smartly-dressed crowd of white mothers and children gathered in front the cinema underscores the film’s focus on middle-class women’s responsibility to have large families.



Figure 2: Baby show apparently sponsored by the movie theater showing the anti-birth control film *The House Without Children*, Washington, D.C., 1919.

Credit: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Controversy over educational films was also on the rise by the 1920s and sex hygiene films came under fire. Before the end of the Great War, the Public Health

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Alexandra Minna Stern, “Making Better Babies: Public Health and Race Betterment in Indiana, 1920-1935,” *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 5 (2002); Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, chap. 6.

Service (PHS) films *Fit to Fight* (1918), *Fit to Win* (1919), and *The End of the Road* (1918) had avoided censure because of the wartime imperative to protect the health of soldiers, because they promoted sexual abstinence rather than the use of prophylaxis, and because they drew on traditional codes of conduct to frame their message in morally appropriate terms.<sup>62</sup> After the war, however, sexual hygiene films enjoyed no such cover and generated controversy when they were used for the education of civilians. With the possibility that they would now be seen by mixed audiences of men and women and that exhibitors could exploit the sexual focus to attract audiences, critics charged that viewers would be corrupted.<sup>63</sup> As overtly educational films on controversial topics increasingly aroused the ire of censors, producers' and reformers' interest in using commercial cinema began to wane. Birth control films, among others, fell victim to this trend.

The decline in birth control films also went hand-in-hand with growing postwar conservatism regarding women's roles. As wartime work opportunities receded, women were encouraged to return to more traditional lives as wives and mothers. Historian of medicine Alexandra Lord has described how the Public Health Service attempted to "restore traditional values through the use of traditional images" in the venereal disease film *The End of the Road*, which focused on women's role in society.<sup>64</sup> A similar practice appeared in post-war films on the subject of birth control. This backlash occurred in the midst of the "roaring 20s" when divorce rates were on

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<sup>62</sup> *Fit to Win* was a reissue of *Fit to Fight* with some additional footage. Schaefer, 24-27. See also Stacie Colwell, "The End of the Road: Gender, the Dissemination of Knowledge, and the American Campaign Against Venereal Disease During World War I," *Camera Obscura* 29 (1993).

<sup>63</sup> John Parascandola, "Syphilis at the Cinema: Medicine and Morals in VD Films of the U.S. Public Health Service in World War II," in Leslie Reagan et al, *Medicine's Moving Pictures*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> "'Naturally Clean and Wholesome': Women, Sex Education, and the United States Public Health Service, 1918-1928." *Social History of Medicine* 17 (2004): 436.

the rise and the flapper typified the modern, sexually independent, young woman. Message films again portrayed selfish women trying to avoid having children and valorized mothering as a woman's most fulfilling activity, as the titles *Motherhood: Life's Greatest Miracle* (1925) and *Miracle of Life* (1926) succinctly convey.<sup>65</sup>

## **A Second Chance at the Cinema**

The potential market for films promoting birth control rallied later in the decade and was vastly expanded by the introduction of synchronized sound around 1927. Weekly paid admissions, 50 million in 1926, rose to 90 million by 1930 as ever-larger audiences flocked to theatres.<sup>66</sup> Before rigorous censorship was enforced by the Production Code Administration in the 1930s, two films took advantage of the gap between existing censorship practices and the virtues of the new technology to promote birth control. *No More Children* (1929) was based on a real case in which a Cleveland judge denied a divorce to a couple with four children and instructed them to practice birth control.<sup>67</sup> Materials promoting the film also noted the introduction of “drastic” sterilization laws in Iowa to prevent people with mental and physical disabilities from having children. Advertisements depicting a stork with a ball and chain asked provocatively, “Should the stork be shackled?” Although the publicity materials appear to condemn birth control, the film itself presented two stories in its favor. The prologue begins at the office of Dr. L. Lee Krauss, a real doctor described

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<sup>65</sup> In contrast, motherhood as a woman's main aspiration virtually disappeared from movies solely produced for entertainment. Schaefer, 166.

<sup>66</sup> Out of a population 120 million: Black, 53.

<sup>67</sup> Cliff Broughton Productions. Film description from Papers of Margaret Sanger, Library of Congress, Reel 65, Sanger to Dr. L. Lee Krauss, The Bureau of Moral and Hygienic Education, Inc., 9 March 1932.

as president of the apparently fictional Bureau of Moral and Hygenic Education and author and lecturer on “Dope, White Slavery and Sex Topics.”

Dr. Krauss’s association with these crowd-pleasing subjects mark him as an unusual, perhaps marginal, member of the medical profession, yet Margaret Sanger was happy to encourage him.<sup>68</sup> While she may have courted the approval of respectable physicians in public, in private she endorsed challenging their stance against birth control. As she wrote to Krauss in 1932, “A moving picture is certainly a splendid medium for the work....If you can help us get that abominable law changed through your educational campaign, it will be a blessing to humanity.”<sup>69</sup>

Dr. Krauss plays himself, giving advice to a young newlywed who complains that because of the neglect of her physician and her mother she is going to have a baby. Georgia doesn’t want to go through with the pregnancy, but Dr. Krauss argues that an abortion would be against nature, all law, and ethics. He goes on to say she has a duty, to which she responds:

Duty? What right have you to speak of duty; your duty is plain and you shirk it. Both mother and you are old-fashioned; laws are being altered by church and state to meet the changed conditions; don’t put your head in the sand like an ostrich....They are new ideas, but they are not unnatural. Just where, doctor, do you men, you lords of creation, tell us we must bear children? Why should women do all the sacrificing?<sup>70</sup>

As she tries to leave, Dr. Krauss tells her to sit down, where she listens to the story of another young woman which becomes the main narrative of the film. A

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<sup>68</sup> The company behind the film had released *The Road to Ruin* the year before, the tawdry story of a young woman who is corrupted by her association with older men into strip poker games and prostitution. Cliff Broughton Productions 6 reels, viewed at the Library of Congress. Brownlow, 175-176.

<sup>69</sup> Papers of Margaret Sanger, Library of Congress, Reel 65, Sanger to Dr. L. Lee Krauss, The Bureau of Moral and Hygenic Education, Inc., 9 March 1932.

<sup>70</sup> Papers of Margaret Sanger, Library of Congress, Reel 65, Krauss to Sanger, 19 February 1932.



young wife, barred in court from having any more children but unable to find out about birth control, commits suicide after becoming pregnant again. The tragedy, like Georgia's dilemma, is presented as the result of the prohibitions against contraceptive information even for married women. The film places the blame with the legal system in two ways: the prohibitions of the Comstock Law that leave the woman ignorant of birth control, and the judge's hypocrisy in banning the couple from having more children without giving them the means to prevent it. Georgia takes the medical profession to task in her attack on Dr. Krauss, and criticizes old-fashioned thinking when blaming him and her mother for keeping her in the dark.

This renewed call for the "repeal of reticence" continued in *Her Unborn Child* (1930).<sup>71</sup> Helen Connover, a character who funds birth control clinics, tries to arrange an abortion for her nephew's girlfriend. In a scene that provides an opportunity for the film to present arguments for and against birth control, the elderly physician Helen meets with refuses her request. "Better a few unwanted children" says Dr. Remington, "than to interfere with the laws of God and nature." Connover chastises the doctor for being "so stupidly conventional," and for bringing religion into the debate. "No woman should be forced to become a mother against her will," she declares. In a final attempt to win him round to her way of thinking, she appeals to his status as a physician, asking him to face the issue "scientifically."

In the version I viewed, which may have been edited by state censors, Helen Connover does not appear in any later scenes, leaving only negative references to her by other characters. The film thus shies away from fully endorsing the opinions she

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<sup>71</sup> Based on a play by Howard McKent Brent. Windsor Picture Plays Inc., 65 min. Print viewed at the Library of Congress.

represents, although this may not reflect the original intentions of the filmmaker. Still, the ambivalence this film displays, by presenting strong arguments in favor of birth control but resolving the story in a more traditional way, epitomizes efforts since the early years of silent film to introduce audiences to the conflicting arguments of the birth control debate within the conventions of “appropriate” storylines.

In the late 1920s, increasingly stringent regulations against these film topics were proposed as censors fought for more effective regulation. Throughout the decade, new regulatory mechanisms had been established within the motion picture industry, but since they were voluntary, they were largely ineffectual.<sup>72</sup> The addition of sound upped the stakes significantly, allowing characters to express more complicated viewpoints than intertitles had allowed for. The use of innuendo and double entendre also broadened opportunities to include oblique references to controversial topics. Spoken dialogue was much harder to censor than intertitles, as any edits would be much more noticeable and disruptive of the narrative.

The bold beginning to the decade defined by *No More Children* and *Her Unborn Child* looked set to falter with the introduction of the Hays Office movie code in 1930 and the launch of The Catholic Legion of Decency in 1933 (renamed the National Legion of Decency in 1934), which secured the pledge of millions of Catholics to boycott movies it deemed immoral.<sup>73</sup> The Hays code, written by Father Daniel Lord, S.J., was most rigorously enforced by a lay Catholic, Joseph Breen. Films on the subject of birth control were unlikely to win over these censors. The new

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<sup>72</sup> These include the “Thirteen Points” of 1921, the launch of The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDAA) in 1922, renamed the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in 1947, the “Formula” of 1924, the list of eleven “Don’ts” and twenty-five “Be Carefuls” in 1927, and the first Production Code of 1930.

<sup>73</sup> Sex-related topics were one major element of the code but violence was also a significant focus.

production code declared sex hygiene, venereal diseases, surgical operations, scenes of actual childbirth (in fact or in silhouette), and other “sex perversions” to be improper subjects for theatrical motion pictures. After 1934, any film to be shown in a major American theater required a seal of approval from the Production Code Administration. The Catholic campaign formalized in the new code and agitated for by the Legion of Decency made another birth control film unlikely in the 1930s. In May 1934, Sanger received a letter from a contact who had queried two major motion picture companies on the possibility of such a project. He reported that despite favorable responses, both were concerned that “Catholic antagonism” would prohibit the production, and “on account of that one question, the Hayes [sic] organization might frown upon the proposition entirely.”<sup>74</sup>

Banning certain subjects from the entertainment screen pushed birth control propaganda out of mainstream Hollywood cinema, along with provocative depictions of sexuality. Instead, the subject resurfaced in an illicit new genre created by the ban: exploitation films or “sex pictures.” As Depression-era audiences turned to the more affordable entertainment of the radio, filmmakers on the margins of commercial moviemaking tried to lure customers back with this type of low-budget feature, which included mostly unknown actors and was made purely for entertainment value. While major studios steered clear of sex-related subjects including venereal disease and abortion, exploitation filmmakers monopolized them as the narrative justification for stories featuring nudity and sexual licentiousness. Although this meant they were denied the Production Code’s seal, shutting them out of the most lucrative movie houses run by major studios, the forbidden status of these films assured them

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<sup>74</sup> Papers of Margaret Sanger, Library of Congress, Reel 65, Lee Morrison to Sanger, 18 May 1934.

audiences in smaller venues. Their producers gave up any pretense of educational value and focused on the dramatic mileage of the topic of sex. *Race Suicide* (1937), its title by now code for any sex-related drama, not a reference to the birth control debate, appealed not because of the social lessons the film could teach but because of the lurid reality of the story.<sup>75</sup> The opening credits, scrolling over the pages of a newspaper, declared the film a “Real Life Drama,” based on news reports about an “organized gang” of illegal abortionists brought to justice. Abortion served as a prurient plot device, and the clinic provided the forum for striptease and nudity in scenes of women undressing.

Early in 1935, Sanger herself was invited to appear in a motion picture on birth control but was warned off the project by a colleague who knew that the production company, Kinematrade, specialized in sex pictures.<sup>76</sup> With no reputable filmmaker broaching the topic, motion picture propaganda was now off-limits. The regulations of the 1930s thus brought to a halt a lively campaign of motion picture propaganda intended to make Americans “birth control conscious.”<sup>77</sup>

## **The Shift to the Radio**

As the struggle to clean up the movies raged on, birth control advocates moved away from the medium and expanded other public relations efforts instead. Margaret Sanger resigned from the American Birth Control League (ABCL) after her media provocation efforts led to conflicts with the acting president, Eleanor Jones.

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<sup>75</sup> Also released as *What Price Passion?* Willis Kent Productions, Six reels, 70 min. Print viewed at the Library of Congress.

<sup>76</sup> Papers of Margaret Sanger, Library of Congress, Reel 63, F.R. to M.S. 18 March 1935.

<sup>77</sup> “The Accident of Birth,” *Fortune*, February 1938, 573.

The organization spent the 1930s fighting to prove that with Sanger gone, birth control was “out of the hands of its propagandist pioneers,” although they continued to court the media.<sup>78</sup> Sanger remained in charge of the Clinical Research Bureau, and in 1929 she launched the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, Inc., a new organization aimed at overturning the law against contraception. Between 1929 and 1937, the committee arranged more than 1,789 lectures by 100 different speakers, and from 1931, mailed more than 68,000 letters a year.<sup>79</sup> Sanger had jumped into cinema at an opportune time when the market for birth control films was flourishing (and before rigid censorship closed off the field), and she showed the same initiative when film was no longer an option. As poorer Americans turned away from the movies and began tuning into the radio, she followed the audience.

Radio broadcasting began in the early 1920s, when listeners met on their neighbors’ porches and at the general store to tune in. As more families acquired their own sets in the car and at home, people overheard broadcasts in their everyday travels to and from work and around town. In the 1930s, women (and some men) listened to soap operas as they undertook household chores during the day, and at night, children and parents gathered round the radio together. The new medium raised issues similar to those accompanying the development of the motion picture: what effect, negative or positive, did radio have on listeners, and should its main purpose be to educate or entertain? Yet these questions took on a particular hue because radio offered a less mediated experience than the movie theater. Whereas men and women could be

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<sup>78</sup> Percy Clark to Margaret Sanger, 1936, quoted in Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 180.

<sup>79</sup> National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, Inc., *A New Day Dawns for Birth Control* (New York: National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, Inc., 1937), 9.

separated in cinema audiences, and children could be refused admittance to films that were only suitable for adults, radio was already inside the house. Any member of the family could listen at home, where men and women, boys and girls, often tuned in together.

Radio also offered listeners a personal connection to a real time experience, which thousands could enjoy at the same time. The effect was a curious combination of the public and the private, characterized by historian Jason Loviglio as an “intimate public.”<sup>80</sup> Listeners shared a social space with others who tuned in to join a local, far-flung, or national audience from the comfort of their own homes. This intimacy was used to powerful effect by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s, when his “fireside chats” helped reassure the nation that the country’s economy could be built back up after the devastation of the Great Depression. At the same time, this characteristic posed unique challenges. The question was how to exploit the commercial potential of the medium without following the scandalized path taken by the movie industry.

Following the model devised by motion picture producers, broadcasters tried to avoid governmental regulation by establishing their own guide to conduct. They did, however, call for federal support to cut down on competition. In the early years of radio, pioneer companies including Westinghouse, Radio Corporation of America (RCA, a subsidiary of General Electric), and American Marconi competed for airtime with thousands of amateur enthusiasts taking up wireless transmission across the

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<sup>80</sup> Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), chap. 1.

country.<sup>81</sup> These companies scrambled to buy up patents on the rapidly evolving technology of broadcasting and formed alliances with one another to consolidate their power. Industry leaders called for federal intervention to regulate the hundreds of stations broadcasting across one another and interrupting each other's transmissions. In 1927 the government responded by launching the Federal Radio Commission (FRC).<sup>82</sup>

The idea that the FRC might favor larger companies at the expense of smaller stations created opposition among reformers determined to harness the educational power of radio. They had also learned from the motion picture industry and wanted to prevent the same triumph of entertainment over education in broadcasting. Gradually they lost out to the few companies that dominated the industry by the 1930s. As large companies embraced advertising and sponsorship to profit from the new medium, they created a commercial monopoly which pushed educationally-oriented broadcasters to the margins of the industry.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Black entrepreneurs were excluded from the industry in the early years. Although some had tried since at least 1930 to purchase radio stations, none were successful until 1949, when Atlanta accountant and professor Jesse B. Blayton bought WERD. Donna L. Halper, "The First African-American Radio Station Owner: Jesse B. Blayton, Sr.," [http://www.lwfaah.net/aaradio/1staa\\_radio.html](http://www.lwfaah.net/aaradio/1staa_radio.html) (accessed 25 July 2010). Although beyond the scope of this study (because I do not focus closely on the local strategies of regional broadcasters), an analysis of birth control programming on black-owned radio stations could prove a productive avenue for further research to illuminate the impact of the complexities of the birth control debate among black communities on media.

<sup>82</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the history of radio, see Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Vol. 1: A Tower of Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

<sup>83</sup> On the triumph of commercial broadcasters over radio reformers, see Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

## **Banning Birth Control from the Airwaves**

At the beginning of radio, most stations broadcast phonograph recordings, weather reports for ships, and occasional news items. Gradually, as they tapped the potential of the technology to bring live events to people far away, some introduced sports commentary and musical performances. Transmissions of presidential speeches offered a compelling example of the possibility of radio to promote a cause, but broadcasters were cautious not to antagonize listeners or the government by promoting political views. In the years before advertising was even considered, opinion-based broadcasts were studiously avoided.

Live transmissions raised the risk that guest performers might be less careful, however, so studios devised methods to deal with such incidents. At Westinghouse, for example, the studio engineer at their Newark, New Jersey station had an emergency switch that would change the transmission to phonograph music if needed. Despite this, their station was the first to refer to contraception on the air. In 1921, actress Olga Petrova was invited to perform, creating some anxiety among staff because she was known for speeches on the topic of birth control. Petrova reassured Westinghouse bosses that she just wanted to read some of her own versions of nursery rhymes. However, when the broadcast began, she recited “there was an old woman who lived in a shoe, she had so many children because she didn’t know what to do.” The engineer didn’t have time to switch to the phonograph and the offending phrase went out live. Executives panicked about a possible government clampdown on the station and called an emergency meeting. They decided never to invite Petrova



back on the air, and to scrutinize more closely every planned program. Borderline broadcasts, such as appearances by performers who might tell risqué jokes, were cancelled outright.<sup>84</sup>

There was no government backlash, but the slip haunted broadcasters for the rest of the decade. The minimal formal restrictions in place also created confusion over exactly what was allowed. Section 29 of the 1927 Federal Radio Act specifically stated that censorship was not even part of the mandate of the Federal Radio Commission. Yet section 11 stipulated that the commission could deny broadcast licenses to stations that did not serve “the public interest, convenience and necessity.”<sup>85</sup> The act also banned obscene, indecent or profane language, which might be interpreted to include any discussion of birth control, although it was not explicitly called out in the text. Most radio stations were unwilling to test these vague boundaries, even though they apparently had greater freedom than motion picture producers had enjoyed.

In the absence of clear guidelines, in March 1929 the industry adopted its own restrictions. The National Association of Broadcasters, launched in 1923 to fight music publishers’ demands for copyright fees for music played over the radio, established the first code of ethics. This brief document, which formed the basis of several new codes adopted over the next few decades, listed two clauses that could apply to birth control. The first recognized that the audience included people of all ages and types of political, social and religious beliefs, and forbade broadcasters from

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<sup>84</sup> Edward T. Vane and Lynne S. Gross, *Programming for TV, Radio and Cable* (Woburn, MA: Butterworth Heinemann Press, 1994), 1; Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 86.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Hadley Cantril and Gordon M. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York and London: Harper & Bros., 1935), 50.

airing “any matter which would commonly be regarded as offensive.” The second, clearly drawing on the guidelines of the Comstock Act, stipulated that “matter which is barred from the mails as fraudulent, deceptive or obscene shall not be broadcast.”<sup>86</sup> The restriction closed a loophole, although as a self-imposed industry ideal it did not carry the same legal weight as the Comstock legislation.

The code of ethics was clear enough, however, that few broadcasters were willing to air the subject when birth control advocates first approached them. In November 1929, the American Birth Control League got into a battle with the leading network, RCA’s National Broadcasting Company (NBC), when the station refused to air coverage of the league’s three-day conference. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which had been founded in 1920, took up their case with the Federal Radio Commission, which deferred to NBC’s Advisory Council. The ACLU presented an argument regularly employed to defend birth control films, that because the subject was frequently discussed in the nation’s press, withholding coverage from radio constituted censorship of an important issue. The Advisory Council countered that radio and newspapers could not be treated in the same way.

The difference lay in the manner in which radio could be overheard by members of the household apart from the person who had originally tuned in. Council member Owen D. Young, CEO of RCA, argued that birth control “was the kind of subject which was not yet ripe for introduction through the radio to the homes of America, available for any member of the family, of any age or condition, to turn

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<sup>86</sup> “Code of Ethics,” in National Association of Broadcasters, *Handbook of the National Association of Broadcasters* (National Broadcasting Company, Inc.: New York, NY, 1929).

on.”<sup>87</sup> Programming needed to be appropriate for all ages and levels of maturity. The rest of the committee agreed. Attacking the birth control movement’s mass media strategy, the committee also argued that the stations would be engaging in propaganda if they agreed to air programs on the subject *before* it was widely accepted. Sanger and her colleagues wanted to employ radio early in their campaign, to *build* support for birth control, but NBC would not cover the topic while it was, in their opinion, still controversial.

The decision set a precedent followed by most other broadcasters. Of 115 radio stations contacted by the American Birth Control League in 1930, only twenty-seven replied. Eight were supportive, but just two said they would air a program for the organization. The league began broadcasting on one in Buffalo the same year and by 1931 had secured a weekly program on the other; WEVD, a station operated by the American Socialist Party and named in honor of organizer Eugene V. Debs. “Birth Control, a Matter of Public Policy,” “Mrs. Average Citizen Asks Some Questions,” and “Birth Control - A Woman’s Right and A Human Right,” featured panels of doctors, ministers, and social workers discussing the issue.<sup>88</sup> This unique opportunity was possible because of the station’s mission to provide an educational forum on workers’ issues. With the larger stations reluctant to air anything to do with the topic, birth control advocates relied upon stations like WEVD to get their message out.

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<sup>87</sup> Louise M. , ““Controversy for Controversy’s Sake?”: Feminism and Early Radio Coverage of Birth Control in the U.S.,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Dresden International Congress Centre, Dresden, Germany, 16 June 2006, [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p91228\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p91228_index.html), (accessed 5 September 2008), p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> “Planned Parenthood on the Air: Some Programs Since 1930,” Planned Parenthood Federation of America Records, 1918-1974 (hereafter PPFA I), Box 100, Folder 7, p.1.

## **Education versus Commercialism**

Stations with an educational mission were a vocal but vulnerable minority in the radio community. Led by reformers who opposed the expansion of commercial radio and the consolidation of the market that had begun in the 1920s, they drew on some of the same resources used in the campaign against the excesses of the movie industry. The Payne Fund, which published the most influential studies of the impact of cinema in the late 1920s and early 1930s, began studying radio in 1927. Armstrong Perry, a former freelance journalist, became the fund's radio counsel and served in the lobby group the National Committee on Education by Radio. The Payne Fund helped establish a series of annual conferences to explore "Education on the Air." The conferences attracted reformers who were critical of the monopoly large companies held over the radio industry and argued that, in the competition for airtime and audiences, educational broadcasting was bound to lose out to entertainment and therefore needed special protection to survive. In fact, commercial broadcasters had tried to force smaller stations off the air or at least onto less powerful bandwidths using the argument that the crowded airwaves created interference during broadcasts. In 1928 the Federal Radio Commission held hearings to decide the fate of 162 stations it had planned to shut down after receiving complaints from the larger companies. The first of the threatened stations to testify, WEVD gave a compelling summary of their mission and the forces against them at the time:

If WEVD is taken off the air and in fact if it is not treated on a parity with others who are richer and more influential with the government, the people of the nation can truly recognize that radio which might be such a splendid force

for the honest clash of ideas,--creating a free market for thought,--is nothing but a tool to be used by the powerful against any form of disagreement, or any species of protest.<sup>89</sup>

The station survived the crisis and in later years extended its educational mission, broadcasting a series of programs under the title “University of the Air,” that featured such well-known guests as John Dewey and Albert Einstein.

Ironically, it was their high position in the monopoly system that made the most powerful broadcasters nervous about controversial topics. Eager to avoid further regulation that might affect their control of radio, industry leaders were careful to present themselves as neutral purveyors of quality programming, not the mouthpiece for propaganda groups. This was the only way to preserve the idea that private ownership and network domination constituted a valid system for the management of the nation’s airwaves.<sup>90</sup>

They also had money at stake. As stations sought to raise profits through advertising they became increasingly nervous about offending sponsors or antagonizing powerful lobbyists. Catholic groups were especially influential, making contraception a particularly unpopular topic. A 1934 summary noted that “any advocacy, or even mention of birth control, or especially of the role of the Catholic Church in opposing birth control,” was kept off the air.<sup>91</sup> The timid approach also applied to related sexual topics such as venereal disease. Public health leaders had emphasized abstinence rather than prophylaxis in earlier motion picture campaigns against syphilis because of opposition from the church as well as their moral

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<sup>89</sup> Bill Jaker, Frank Sulek and Peter Kanze, *The Airwaves of New York: Illustrated Histories of 156 AM Stations in the Metropolitan Area, 1921-1996* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1998), 65.

<sup>90</sup> McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*, 118.

<sup>91</sup> James Rorty quoted in Cantrill et al, *The Psychology of Radio*, 57.

interpretation of the disease, and they kept to this approach for radio. But having been driven out of film when educational topics were banned from the cinema, syphilis was no less controversial over the airwaves.

In 1934, New York State Health Commissioner Thomas Parran, a Catholic himself, was told by Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) that he could not mention the words syphilis or gonorrhea by name during his scheduled radio address on the subject. The show was the fourth part of a nineteen-episode series on health issues, and other episodes had aired without any difficulty. Instead of Parran's speech, the network broadcast fifteen minutes of orchestral music.<sup>92</sup> The incident created a national scandal as other leading public health figures denounced radio censorship. John Rice, Health Commissioner of New York City, had been cut off the air by NBC during a luncheon speech when he began talking about syphilis not long before. After the Parran incident Rice wrote to CBS, NBC, and fifteen newspapers to protest. M. H. Aylesworth, president of NBC replied that the station had to be careful because of the criticism they received from parents who did not think their children should be exposed to such subjects. He argued that remarks made in a lecture hall or published in print might not be appropriate for broadcast because listeners thought of the radio as an invited guest in their homes.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Allan Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135; "Syphilis and Radio," *Time*, 3 December 1934. See also Elizabeth Fee, "Sin vs. Science: Venereal Disease in Baltimore in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 43, no. 2 (1988): 150.

<sup>93</sup> John Parascandola, *Sex, Sin, and Science: A History of Syphilis in America* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2008), 91.

The lone broadcaster brave enough to buck convention seems to have been WEVD, who stepped in to put Parran on the air. As they testified to reformers at the Education on the Air conference the following year,

We were the only station in the country that extended its facilities to a prominent health authority, who was recently barred from delivering his speech on a network. He delivered the canceled speech over WEVD in the exact manner he wanted to.<sup>94</sup>

Eighteen months after the CBS decision, having been appointed the country's Surgeon General, Parran launched a national campaign to tackle syphilis and the secrecy surrounding the disease. As he wrote in an article in *Reader's Digest*, "we might virtually stamp out this disease were we not hampered by the widespread belief that nice people don't talk about syphilis."<sup>95</sup> Even so, like the venereal disease campaigners who preceded him, Parran was careful not to step into the birth control debate by promoting the use of condoms.

In 1934 the government replaced the Federal Radio Commission with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The Communications Act which established the FCC had little effect on the power of the bigger companies that dominated the industry, but did include requirements that commercial radio air educational or public service programs for free. This marked a major shift from the early days of radio, when stations could refuse to air any program on any grounds. Historian Robert McChesney has argued that this was only a very limited gain,

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<sup>94</sup> Morris S. Novik, "The University of the Air" in Levering Tyson and Josephine MacLatchey, *Education on the Air: Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Institutes for Education by Radio Combined with the Fifth Annual Advisory Assembly of the National Council on Radio in Education* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1935), 115.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Fee, "Sin vs. Science," 150.

although it did create a window for non-commercial broadcasting on national networks.<sup>96</sup> Stations were still beholden to their influential sponsors.

The American Birth Control League (ABCL) quickly responded to the FCC mandate with a series of radio addresses. The first nationwide broadcast was transmitted on the formerly reluctant NBC network, on 12 February 1935, featuring Congressman Walter N. Pierce talking about “Birth Control Legislation.” The following day a news commentator on WOR radio in Newark, New Jersey, announced an ABCL petition and launched the country’s first radio poll on the question of birth control. Sanger was thrilled to note that hundreds of letters were sent to the station, with approximately 95 percent in favor, proving that in the five years since the ABCL first approached NBC, birth control advocates had indeed been able to secure public support.<sup>97</sup>

Birth control advocates drew on the political rhetoric of the New Deal to frame their argument on the radio. Building on the phenomenon of President Roosevelt’s “fireside chats,” Sanger and her colleagues compared their campaign to the government’s role in regulating agricultural production and managing the economic and social welfare of the country. On WWJ radio in Detroit, Michigan in 1939, Dr. Clarence Cook Little, managing director of the American Society for the Control of Cancer, participated in an interview for the ABCL on “The Relation of Birth Control to Democracy.”<sup>98</sup> The interviewer noted that

nearly everybody has heard about, and is interested in, such subjects as crop control, flood control, disease and crime control, but birth control—that is,

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<sup>96</sup> *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*, 254.

<sup>97</sup> Margaret Sanger, 7 March 1935, “Radio News!,” PPFA I, Box 100 Folder 3.

<sup>98</sup> “Dr. Little’s Radio Presentation,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 4, p.1



controlling the number of children in the family—is less talked and written about.

Cook explained the reasons for the discrepancy, arguing that because the consequences of unrestrained reproduction were not felt immediately, they were not taken seriously. He also chastised the “mistaken attitude” that “absence of control means freedom.” At the time, critics of the governmental incursion into working and home life were making just such an argument.

New Deal language also influenced a major shift in the terminology of the birth control movement. In 1935, Sanger used the phrase “family planning” in a radio address she delivered on CBS. She noted that listeners had heard a great deal about national security through national planning, and urged that now was the time to consider family security through family planning.<sup>99</sup> Historians have described Sanger’s shift in terminology, to “family planning” and “planned parenthood,” as a move away from the feminist goals of female self-determination implied by the original phrase “birth control.” Yet the radio scripts make it clear that several years before ABCL was renamed the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1942, birth control advocates invoked the idea of planning to draw an explicit link between their cause and the transformation of American life under the New Deal.<sup>100</sup> In the context of financial instability following the Great Depression, birth control advocates also reiterated their economic arguments on the benefits of limiting family size in relation to the father’s earnings.

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<sup>99</sup> “Family Planning: A Radio Talk,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 4, n.p. See also “Radio Interview (between Mrs. Bess Augsburg and an Announcer,” ca. 1941, PPFA I, Box 11, Folder 4, p. 1: “In recent years we have heard a great deal about planning. Planning to conserve our natural resources – forests, minerals, soil, power. Planning for health and social security.”

<sup>100</sup> For a discussion of the role of planning in New Deal ideology, see Patrick D. Reagan, *Designing a New America: The Origins of New Deal Planning, 1890-1943* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), chaps. 1-2.

## **Storytelling Replaces the Lecture Format**

Birth control broadcasting expanded as radio matured. As programming became more sophisticated, birth control advocates were forced to change their approach. In the early years of radio, the novelty of tuning in to hear a voice from miles away--across the “ether,” as it was called--was in itself enough to attract listeners. Broadcasters desperate for material paid little attention to the format in which it was delivered during the first fifteen years. The pioneer birth control programs reflected this and followed the simple format of a lecture or a question-and-answer session. But on October 30, 1938, the powerful potential of dramatized narratives to engage and influence audiences was demonstrated, when “War of the Worlds” was broadcast on CBS. The radio play, based on a novel by H. G. Wells, described an alien invasion of the United States using the format of a news bulletin to document the crisis as it unfolded. Panic spread across the country as listeners jammed emergency phone lines and fled their homes. Although the mass hysteria generated by the broadcast led to calls for radio censorship, public opinion improved in a matter of days. In fact, the audience for the next week’s radio drama almost doubled.<sup>101</sup>

The following year, when the American Birth Control League (now renamed the Birth Control Federation of America) considered a radio campaign, they took note of the changed expectations among radio broadcasters and audiences. The creation of the Birth Control Federation of America (BCFA) marked the end of the split between

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<sup>101</sup> Jacqueline Tracy Orr, “Panic Diaries: Cybernetics, Psychiatry, and the Technoscientific Control of Social Dis-ease,” Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999), 36-39.

Sanger and the ABCL, as it was absorbed by the new organization, along with the Clinical Research Bureau over which she had retained control. With a new chapter of their work beginning, the BCFA began researching the idea of a “radio disk,” a pre-recorded program that could be distributed to radio stations countrywide.

Staff member Martha Mumford proposed three possible types of program: a series of short talks given by nationally-recognized figures in the birth control movement, a quiz or question-and-answer session led by Margaret Sanger, or a skit portraying the “evils” of unplanned parenthood and showing how birth control could prevent them. As stations were more likely to broadcast a dramatic program than a “purely educational or propaganda offering” by this time, they decided to develop a skit.<sup>102</sup>

The scriptwriter and supervisor of production was Benjamin Potts of N.W. Ayer Advertising, previously a writer for the National Tuberculosis Association media campaigns. After three years of working on TB propaganda, Potts had developed a method to balance factual information with the appeal of the story. Because the most influential people in the field were usually the least likely to hold the audience’s attention, he had devised a way of “‘humanizing’ the dignitary or expert and making his or her words the climax of a dramatic build-up.” The program would begin with a story of the hardship faced by a family who don’t have enough money. The guest speaker would then deliver a message about birth control, tying the points back to the elements in the story. The culmination of the piece was the happy resolution—an explanation that birth control can alleviate the problem.

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<sup>102</sup> M. Mumford to Dr. Morris, “Report on Radio Disk Possibilities,” 1939, PPFA I, Box 99, Folder 14.

Potts developed “Almost Daylight,” a script about a woman who abandons her youngest child at a children’s home but is caught leaving by a policeman. In the dialogue between them, the initially unsympathetic officer realizes that the mother cannot afford to raise all the children she has, and that she is not to blame. Their exchange counters common misconceptions much as a question-and-answer format would have, but in a dramatized fashion more likely to engender compassion among listeners. As Potts explained,

The effect of this approach to the problem transforms a lecture into a human interest story, and gives dramatic impact with a strong emotional appeal to a message that would otherwise miss all but the social-minded and the intellectual.<sup>103</sup>

As they attempted to keep up with the changing style of radio, birth control advocates turned increasingly to such personalized narratives to improve the appeal of their broadcasts.

## **Opposition on the Radio**

Not every issue could be handled this way, however. Father Charles E. Coughlin, a right-wing radio preacher with a reputation for fiery attacks on his enemies, used some of his weekly sermons to denounce the growing movement in support of birth control, “a subject which should never be mentioned in decent society but which this very day has been made a by-word in the mouths of inquiring children.”<sup>104</sup> Coughlin denounced the economic arguments made by birth control advocates and railed against race suicide, and although in this speech he explicitly

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<sup>103</sup> Potts to Charles Magill Smith, 27 May 1940, PPFA I, Box 99 Folder 14.

<sup>104</sup> “The Great Betrayal,” 22 March 1931 in Ronald H. Carpenter, *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998), 136.

blamed the newspapers for publicizing the cause, it is significant that he used radio, as did his opponents in the birth control movement, as the primary means to reach thousands of potential supporters in the heyday of the medium. As he said in response to boos from birth control advocates at a House Judiciary Committee hearing where Sanger testified in 1934, “I’ll take care of them over the radio.”<sup>105</sup>

Sanger used her own celebrity to counter such attacks, broadcasting regularly to quash rumors and misinformation. Her opponents, for example, continued to deliberately confuse birth control with abortion just as they had done in the era of birth control films. In a 1935 radio address Sanger restated the difference in clear terms. “There has been a lot of loose talk about birth control ‘operations,’” she said, “there is no such thing as a birth control operation. Remember this: birth control means to *prevent*, not to *destroy*.”<sup>106</sup> Five years later, with the charge still circulating, some birth control broadcasts began by stating that birth control did not mean abortion or sterilization.<sup>107</sup>

Opponents could not turn back the rising tide of support for birth control, however. By 1934 writer Dorothy Dunbar Bromley declared that this contentious issue had “become respectable,” thanks in part to the extensive publicity activities of Sanger and her supporters. By 1936, when *Fortune* magazine reported that 63 percent of Americans now believed “in the teaching and practice of birth control,” social commentators were denouncing a birth control “plague” and blaming propagandists

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<sup>105</sup> “Birth Controllers on Parade,” *Time*, 29 January 1934.

<sup>106</sup> “Family Planning: A Radio Talk,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 4, n.p.

<sup>107</sup> “Radio Talk on Birth Control,” W.E. Morris, M.D., 11 March 1940, PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 4, p.1.

for its creation.<sup>108</sup> The same year the provisions of the federal Comstock Act were overturned when a Supreme Court case instigated by Sanger, *U.S. v. One Pack of Japanese Pessaries*, ruled that birth control could no longer be declared obscene.

Responding to the changing climate of opinion, in 1937 the American Medical Association finally endorsed birth control. This opened the way for several new lines of argument in birth control media. Advocates could now highlight the support of the medical profession, and they invited them on to the radio to explain the health benefits of child spacing. They also differentiated between the safe methods available from qualified physicians and nurses at clinics as opposed to the ineffective and dangerous gadgets advertised under the euphemism of “feminine hygiene.” Doctors could propose birth control programs alongside other public health initiatives that already received broad support, such as campaigns against tuberculosis and diphtheria and efforts to maintain a pure water and food supply.

By January 1940, a Gallup poll stated that 77 percent of Americans approved of the provision of birth control by government-supported clinics. The improving image of the movement meant that they could ramp up publicity efforts and move beyond simply justifying contraception. The same year, the BCFA began using the radio to support fundraising campaigns.<sup>109</sup> However, though they had devised scripts that local broadcasters could adapt to include speakers from the community as well as specific information on the location and opening hours of area clinics, birth control

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<sup>108</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 140-141. Norman Himes, *Medical History of Contraception*, (Baltimore: The Williams & Wilkins Company, 1936), xiii. The author, employed by the National Committee on Maternal Health, Inc., argued conversely that the desire for contraception long pre-dated the propaganda movements.

<sup>109</sup> “Planned Parenthood on the Air: Some Programs Since 1930,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 7.

advocates had not successfully persuaded all small stations to air their programs. In April 1941, radio industry insiders told birth control advocates that they needed to break into the major networks before they would be able to persuade more regional broadcasters to take up their programs.

### **“Helping a Nation at War”<sup>110</sup>**

When the United States joined the Second World War at the end of the year, radio broadcasting was quickly put to service for the war effort, opening the way for propaganda in a manner that had been previously unthinkable. In fact, critics of President Roosevelt’s New Deal, especially newspaper owners, had vigorously criticized his use of mass media to shift public opinion. The war swept aside such objections and in fact shored up the image of radio as a purveyor of truth. Broadcasts from London during the blitz and from the frontlines of battle turned the medium into the most trusted of all mass media, above motion pictures and newspapers.<sup>111</sup>

In 1942, for the first time, the Birth Control Federation of America, by now renamed the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, persuaded national networks to broadcast coverage of its annual meeting during prime air time.<sup>112</sup> The next task was to reassure station managers and listeners that birth control would not jeopardize the war effort. With the ongoing need for new citizens to fill the workforce and fight for the country, arguments in defense of birth control needed to be particularly persuasive. Radio scripts addressed the concern that family planning would lead to a

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<sup>110</sup> “Planned Parenthood in Wartime,” script, 1943, PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 6, p.1

<sup>111</sup> Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>112</sup> Margaret Sanger to friends of Planned Parenthood, 22 January 1943. PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 6

rapid decline in births by stressing that most “normal” people *wanted* to have babies-- they just wanted to plan when to have them, and by noting that the American birthrate was in fact flourishing. Planned Parenthood also contrasted family planning with fascist pronatalism. As a script for a Richmond, Virginia station put it in 1942,

while Hitler enslaves German women and tries to drive them to further breeding with the whip, we have been thinking of our American mothers as precious human beings, of our babies as the citizens of the free world of tomorrow.<sup>113</sup>

This theme echoed the message that the Office of War Information, the government’s propaganda department, was disseminating in its extensive use of radio broadcasts. Programs such as “Women versus Hitlerism,” “The German Mother,” and “The Nazi Estate of Matrimony” described German women and those of occupied countries as being forced to bear children, even outside of marriage, to stock Hitler’s armies.<sup>114</sup>

In 1943, Planned Parenthood produced a radio program on the burden of pregnancy for wartime couples. The script was drafted by Mildred Gilman of the Public Information Department, and finalized by E. Stephen Carlin, a script writer in the Continuity Division of NBC. To enhance its national appeal, the cast included several actors described as “NBC stars.”<sup>115</sup> *Freedom from Fear*, broadcast on WRNL in Richmond, Virginia on October 1, 1943, told the story of a nurse at a factory who investigated low morale and declining productivity among the female workforce.<sup>116</sup> She learned that many of the women dreaded visits from their husbands on leave from the army, as they might lose their jobs if they became pregnant. The nurse resolved

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<sup>113</sup> “Parenthood Forum,” 1942, PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 6, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Horten, *Radio Goes to War*, 57.

<sup>115</sup> “Let’s Put Planned Parenthood on the Air,” PPFA I, Box 99, Folder 15.

<sup>116</sup> “Planned Parenthood on the Air,” 5.



the situation by persuading the factory's management to provide birth control information, job guarantees and health services for pregnant women.

The show was marketed as a "woman's program," intended for broadcast in the morning or early afternoon when soap operas, a recently launched genre of daytime drama, usually aired. These programs, originally developed by advertisers to help sell household products, played an important role promoting women's new responsibilities during the war. With men drafted into military service, hundreds of thousands of women were needed to staff the manufacturing plants that produced armaments as well as everyday necessities. The radio serials focused on the intimate lives of a small group and could be easily adapted to include characters who valiantly went to work, as well as other women who were punished by misfortune if they proved too lazy or self-indulgent to join the effort. In this way, they mimicked the proscriptive function of the "fallen woman" genre of motion pictures described earlier, by reinforcing the gender expectations of their time.

The soap opera format provided ample opportunity to depict sexual mores and the results of transgressing them. Yet *Freedom from Fear* offered a means of escape from some of the very consequences that these dramas described, such as pregnancy out of wedlock. By broadcasting in their usual schedule, birth control advocates thus exploited this context to reinforce their message. The storyline also tapped into a particular construction of female sexuality that helped mobilize American support for the war. As historian Robert Westbrook demonstrated in his adroit discussion of the function of the pin-up girl, the government worked closely with Hollywood filmmakers during the Second World War to present women as "icons of male

obligation.”<sup>117</sup> Posed images were circulated in magazines and plastered on airplanes, and young women sent their sweethearts self-portraits in the same style. The soldiers were fighting for these women, who would also be their reward when they returned home victorious.<sup>118</sup> In this construction, working wives *had* to make themselves sexually available when their husbands were home on leave. Planned Parenthood could help them uphold this patriotic duty without the burden of becoming pregnant.

Although the narrative of *Freedom from Fear* specified the use of birth control for married couples, in reality the clinics afforded single men and women and those engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage a great degree of sexual independence. The characters depicted were already married, but at least one of the surviving radio scripts from this time noted that Planned Parenthood would “welcome girls *about to be* married” [emphasis mine].<sup>119</sup> It seems that single women could also use their services if they presented themselves in this way. In answer to critics of birth control who opposed the movement on these grounds, scripts declared the unfairness of withholding information from married people to prevent the actions of a “doubtful group” of those who “wish to evade the moral law.”<sup>120</sup>

Despite the possibility that birth control could get into the wrong hands, responses to the broadcast were largely positive, and station managers applauded the “tasteful” approach to the subject. The contemporary relevance of the narrative no

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<sup>117</sup> Robert Westbrook, “‘I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” *American Quarterly* 42 (1990): 589. Marilyn E. Hegarty also explores the cultivation of female sexual availability in American magazines and advertising in this period, in *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>118</sup> Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

<sup>119</sup> “Planned Parenthood in Wartime,” p.2.

<sup>120</sup> “Radio Interview between Mrs. Bess Augsburger and an Announcer,” PPFA I, Box 11, Folder 4, p. 7.

doubt played a part, as did changing attitudes to non-reproductive sexuality typified in, and partly constituted by, the rise of the pin-up girl and other erotic imagery in advertising and popular culture.<sup>121</sup> This shift presaged growing support for the goals of Planned Parenthood and the organization lost no time in expanding their own advertising campaign to those local stations that had previously proven resistant to their messaging.

Favorable reactions to repeat broadcasts of *Freedom from Fear* in Mississippi, Delaware, New York and Maryland won the approval of other stations for future shows.<sup>122</sup> This encouraging response led Planned Parenthood to develop numerous other broadcasts. As well as prerecorded programs, the New York headquarters prepared template scripts that could be used by regional affiliates. These organizations were to select figures from their own community to fill the roles, as in “Should War Brides Have Babies?” a scripted conversation between a minister, an educator, and a psychiatric social worker.

To help them negotiate with station managers, Planned Parenthood provided guidelines for affiliates planning to approach their local broadcasters, advising them to take influential members of the community such as clergymen or business leaders to the radio station when submitting the record for audition, to highlight support for the broadcast. They also noted that the Office of War Information had informed them they did not need to approve the broadcast, and that the U.S. Public Health Service

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<sup>121</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth Century U.S.,” *Journal of Women's History* 8 (Fall 1996); Jennifer McAndrew, “All-American beauty: The experiences of African American, European American, and Japanese American women with beauty culture in the mid-twentieth century United States” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2008); John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>122</sup> Planned Parenthood on the Air: Some Programs Since 1930,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 7, p. 6.

recommended child spacing services in its “Outline of an Industrial Health Program.” If a local radio station anticipated opposition from Catholic groups, League representatives were encouraged to cite a recent poll in *Fortune* magazine in which 84.9 percent of women asked (including 69 percent of Catholic women surveyed), agreed that birth control information should be available to married women. Not entirely confident that they could escape censure, however, the national headquarters also advised against any advance publicity. They suggested instead that local friends of the organization be encouraged to tune in and to send a letter of support *after* the broadcast.

Levels of local broadcasting were highly variable across the country. Because of the short lifespan of some broadcasters, and the fragmentation of station records that have survived, it is not clear how many regional stations ultimately aired Planned Parenthood materials. By 1944 though, it appears that many more were willing to do so than just a few years before.<sup>123</sup> In stark contrast to the early years of radio, family planning was now broadcast widely, and in some areas, on a regular basis.<sup>124</sup>

## Conclusion

In the first half of the twentieth century, birth control advocates used the mass media to reframe contraception from a private, secret matter to an acceptable part of life fit for public discussion. Although their campaign began in print, they quickly

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<sup>123</sup> James H. Scull to D. Kenneth Rose, 21 September 1944, “Analysis of Mailings,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 1, p. 5.

<sup>124</sup> Helen Martin, public relations chair of the Planned Parenthood Association of the District of Columbia, for example, hosted a weekly five-minute program on WINX in Maryland entitled *Planned Parenthood in Wartime*. “A One-Woman Radio Program,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 2, “Amateurs on the Air.”

embraced the more far-reaching medium of film to deliver their message. Motion pictures had the potential to reach a large and diverse audience and gave the force of visual communication to ideas that had previously circulated only in print. Members of the birth control movement as well as their opponents had great confidence in the capacity of cinema to influence attitudes. In fact, the belief that film held a special sway over audiences eventually led to the introduction of rigorous censorship by the Production Code Administration (PCA) in the 1930s, closing the window of opportunity for birth control movies. Daniel A. Lord, the Jesuit priest who helped write the infamous code, described film as “a medium so powerful that it might well change our whole attitude toward life, civilization, and established customs.”<sup>125</sup> This was exactly what birth control advocates had counted on.

The period from the mid-1910s through the mid-1930s saw the birth control issue make tremendous headway in the cinema. Where they were well received, films may have helped to normalize the topic. Where they provoked censorship, they also ignited discussion. Yet the medium was only useful when film could bestow credibility through its status as mainstream, educational entertainment. After the Hays Code was enforced in 1934, it became impossible to use entertainment film for explicitly educational projects. With the Catholic Church so influential in the drafting and application of the code, birth control became a particularly problematic subject for motion pictures.

Before any such regulations were introduced in the radio industry, birth control advocates moved their campaign from the screen to the airwaves. In a reversal

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<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Stephen Vaughn, “Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code,” *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (Jun 1990): 40.

of what happened in cinema, they gained more opportunities to broadcast as regulation of the new medium increased. This was due, in part, to the efforts of reformers who were determined to keep educational material on the air. As advertising became radio's principal source of revenue and a prominent presence between programs (and even within them, thanks to manufacturers' sponsorship of popular shows and burgeoning product placement), these campaigners championed the use of radio for the good of society. The need to preserve non-commercial radio was also powerfully demonstrated when the United States joined the Second World War and the government secured airtime to promote the war effort.

Educational media, however, faced competition from increasingly sophisticated radio broadcasting as the medium matured. The producers of birth control programming kept up with these trends by diversifying their approach. Employing some of the tricks they had honed in filmmaking, Sanger and her colleagues improved the appeal of their messaging by incorporating dramatic narratives alongside the traditional lecture format. They also added respected community leaders as discussants in interview programs, to link family planning with health, economic stability, and government policy. By the end of the Second World War, family planning was a household term, regularly transmitted to the nation's homes and workplaces on the radio. Over the period described here, birth control was transformed from an illegal trade discussed only in private to a publicly promoted practice. The media served first to document the campaign for legal distribution of contraception and galvanize support, then to promote its availability and the justifications for its use.

As I explore in the next chapter, at the end of the conflict Planned Parenthood had to redefine its role. Communications experts, who had benefited from the wartime need for propaganda, required a new focus in the post-war period. Experts on public opinion who had specialized in promoting the image of American activities now hoped to demonstrate a purpose for mass persuasion in peacetime. In a return to the concerns of an earlier era, demographers, economists, and politicians were beginning to express anxiety about the rates of reproduction among the poor, this time not just at home but around the world. Overpopulation threatened to spark new wars just as peace had been secured. For a field in search of a focus the issue was ideal, resurrecting the specter of unchecked population growth that had dominated the birth control debate in the early twentieth century, and elevating it to a matter of global importance. As one prominent communications expert suggested to a colleague in 1945, “our big task now is to communicate to large masses some of the ideas that may save us from race suicide.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Stephen M. Corey to Robert Maynard Hutchins, quoted in Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, “How Not to Found a Field: New Evidence on the Origins of Mass Communications Research,” *Journal of Communication* (Sept 2004): 554.

## Chapter 3: The Medium Shapes the Message

In the 1950s, family planning advocates were able to capitalize on the growing interest in the overpopulation issue and expand their media activities. As communications specialists looking for post-war applications of their research devised new strategies of persuasion, they developed the first theories of mass communication specific to family planning. Planned Parenthood applied these ideas in various projects, eventually founding a specialized department of Information and Education to shape their media efforts. The partnership between family planning advocates and the burgeoning academic discipline proved mutually beneficial as messaging strategies were theorized and tested in the service of the population crisis. Planned Parenthood gained new expertise while communications researchers found renewed purpose (and funding) for their work.

The press and politicians took up the issue of fertility control as part of an intensive focus on the issue of overpopulation at the same time that other sexually-related topics were beginning to appear more regularly in public discourse. Indeed, the representation of sex in American culture expanded exponentially in this period with the diversification of commercial media and the liberalization of attitudes towards sexuality typified in and accelerated by the introduction of *Playboy* magazine in 1953, the Kinsey reports on sexuality of 1948 and 1953, and the Food and Drug Administration's approval of the contraceptive pill in 1960.

As the sexual revolution unfolded in the 1960s family planning advocates expected increasing tolerance for the topic among broadcasters and audiences. However, in contrast to the shifts described in the previous chapter, the growing



public discourse on sexuality gradually began to impede family planning advocacy as it galvanized groups opposing sex education, women's liberation, public funding for family planning, the sexual revolution, and the rising representation of sex in American culture.

In the mid-1960s, polls revealed broad public support for family planning for population control.<sup>1</sup> As a result, family planning promoters found new opportunities to broadcast their message. Focusing on the most popular medium of the era, they began to target television. Although first encountering the same kinds of barriers as they had entering film and radio, they found television more accommodating as the industry struggled to assert its relevance in the face of criticisms over bland and poor quality programming.

Bolstered by the trends and following the lead of the women's movement and other supporters of abortion reform, Planned Parenthood began to broaden their purview to include campaigning for legal abortion for the first time. Whereas in the early years of the female-led movement advocates had sought to distance birth control from abortion, now the women of the country's primary family planning organization (and their predominantly male leadership) sought to defend the practice, although less stridently than the feminist organizations leading the charge. This put them in direct conflict with a growing anti-abortion movement.

Both supporters and opponents deployed media to win over public opinion on the abortion issue, a battle that only increased in intensity after abortion was legalized nationwide by *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973. As the backlash intensified, family planning

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Berelson, "American Attitudes on Population Policy," *Studies in Family Planning* 1, no. 9 (1966): 5-8.

promoters found themselves frequently on the losing end of aggressive publicity stunts, and patients and clinic staff suffered threats and harassment. As I explore here, these events, combined with growing conservatism regarding the treatment of sexuality in “educational” media, convinced Planned Parenthood to tone down their rhetoric and de-emphasize sex. The organization thus completed the process begun when the movement began to align with the medical profession earlier in the century, and parted ways with feminism. This capitulation would have enormous consequences for the promotion of, and access to family planning in ensuing years. The shift would also prompt some family planning promoters to strike out on their own, either to pursue less conservative media projects or advance an explicitly feminist agenda, as I explore here.<sup>2</sup>

### **Diffusing the Population Bomb<sup>3</sup>**

The 1950s saw a dramatic shift in public attitudes and government policy on family planning fueled by two issues: growing anxiety about the dangerous consequences of overpopulation, and the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union for global influence. Analysts in the United States predicted a “population bomb” that would lead to food shortages, starvation, and rioting. Communist leaders could then exploit this instability to expand Soviet power across vulnerable nations. In a

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<sup>2</sup> By focusing on media I have already limited my study to a particular group within the history of the birth control movement. As I trace their move away from the formal organizations leading family planning promotion it should be clear that my aim is to illuminate the activities of a particular cohort, rather than chronicling the movement as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> The “diffusion” model of communications, to be discussed later in the chapter, theorizes that early adopters or opinion leaders help spread an innovation, such as the adoption of family planning practices, through a community.

combined effort to prevent this, demographers, economists, politicians, and environmentalists converged with family planning advocates around the concept of worldwide “population control.”<sup>4</sup>

Environmentalists first popularized the subject of overpopulation, with the 1948 publication of two books written by conservationists, *The Road to Survival* by ornithologist William Vogt, and *Our Plundered Planet*, by Fairfield Osborn, the head of the New York Zoological Society. The authors described catastrophic damage to the earth’s resources and widespread warfare caused by lack of food if the world’s population continued to grow unchecked.<sup>5</sup> Scientific data gathered by demographers, who forecast unsustainable population growth, and economists, who linked economic development with smaller family size, brought scholarly credibility to the topic. By the mid-1950s there were five academic journals on population issues in the United States as well as two international publications to which American scholars frequently contributed.<sup>6</sup>

In this rising fervor a number of powerful figures were inspired to devote themselves to the cause, and their involvement rapidly catapulted the issue to the top of the government’s agenda. In 1952, philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III founded the Population Council, which began promoting the worldwide use of contraception to limit family size. Hugh Moore, who had made his fortune in the Dixie Cup Corporation, also aggressively marketed the issue with the help of influential

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<sup>4</sup> Donald T. Critchlow, “Birth Control, Population Control, and Family Planning: An Overview,” *Journal of Policy History* 7 (1995); Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington: Island Press, 2005), 71.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 116.

advertising guru Bruce Barton. In 1954, he published a pamphlet titled *The Population Bomb*, which was distributed to over one and a half million Americans by the mid-1960s and was soon followed by sociologist Paul Ehrlich's book of the same name in 1968. Moore also launched full-page advertisements in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Time* magazine, a media strategy that was considered "highly unorthodox" by researchers concerned about the overpopulation issue who advocated scholarly publishing as the means to build the evidence of the problem.<sup>7</sup> Moore retorted that before he took the issue on in this way, nobody had listened to the demographers' dire warnings: "You've been raised in academic halls. I've been raised in the marketplace. I'm used to presenting facts dramatically."<sup>8</sup> Despite its detractors, the approach proved successful. Like Sanger's attempts to provoke controversy, the advertisements generated attacks by the Catholic Church that brought a far wider audience to the topic than had been previously reached by family planning communication efforts. Planned Parenthood would later utilize the press themselves for a national advertising campaign.<sup>9</sup>

The topic of overpopulation was broadcast on the newest medium of mass communication, television, beginning in December 1951, when journalist Edward R. Murrow, renowned for his war reporting from London during the blitz, described global population pressures in the first of his annual round-up of the news, "Year of Crisis," on CBS. The issue made headlines throughout the decade, and by 1959, when *CBS Reports* aired an hour-long documentary on India's population problem, nine

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<sup>7</sup> J. Mayone Stycos, *The Great Tabu: A Half Century of Population and Family Planning Communication* (Hawaii: East-West Communication Institute, 1977), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Tilson Piotrow, *World Population Crisis: The United States Response* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 18.

<sup>9</sup> J. Mayone Stycos, "Desexing Birth Control," *Family Planning Perspectives* 9 (1977): 290.

million viewers tuned in. The program was rebroadcast early in 1960 with an extra half-hour of footage on the issue of population and economic development, and was watched by a record-breaking 9.5 million people.<sup>10</sup> The same year, General William H. Draper, Jr., former Under Secretary of War, brought the subject of overpopulation under government review, proposing federal funding for family planning programs around the world. The recommendations of the “Draper Report” (formally authored by The President’s Committee to Study the U.S. Military Assistance Program) were rejected by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, although they laid the groundwork for later federal involvement.<sup>11</sup> The same year, the Catholic bishops of the United States stepped into the fray and denounced public assistance for the promotion of family planning at home or abroad. As the *New York Times* reported, far from quelling the debate, their statement helped move the issue “from the areas of private morals and theology into the realm of public discussion of political action,” in effect servicing the efforts of the family planning movement by spotlighting religious opposition.<sup>12</sup> The controversy that resulted saw a massive increase in media coverage, including a cover story in *Life* magazine and articles in Catholic publications questioning the Church’s position. Overpopulation, and therefore family planning, had become a central issue of the era.

In theory, communications specialists who joined the population control effort could draw on the strategies of mass persuasion perfected and tested during the war.

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<sup>10</sup> Piotrow, *World Population*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> After retiring he had taken a job as president of the Mexican Light and Power Company. Draper co-founded the Population Crisis Committee in 1965 and was later appointed to the governing body of IPPF. He went on to become Honorary Vice-Chairman of Planned Parenthood. Eisenhower was interested in population issues but became more active on the question after leaving the government. He subsequently served as Honorary Chairman of Planned Parenthood.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Krock, 1 December 1959, 38.

Emboldened by the success of consumer advertising and various wartime communications projects, they had begun with a generous assessment of the power of mass media to influence opinion. The “hypodermic needle” or strong effects model depicted audiences as passive receptors “inoculated” by media messaging who uncritically accepted the ideas directed to them wholly and without question.<sup>13</sup> After the war, as they undertook more systematic study and evaluation of communications campaigns, some researchers became less confident. The “limited effects” model, which postulated that audiences read their own interpretations into media messages and differed widely in their understanding and acceptance of intended meanings, soon displaced the hypodermic needle theory as the leading explanation of media influence.<sup>14</sup> Scholars gradually gave up on the idea that the majority of an audience could be swayed by broadcasting and looked instead for “opinion leaders” or “influentials” who would adopt a new idea quickly then promote the message to a wider group.<sup>15</sup> This strategy, known as the “diffusion model” of influence, was first described by rural sociologists studying the implementation of hybrid corn farming in the midwest of the United States in the 1940s. The theory dominated communications research for the next two decades, when over four hundred publications on diffusion were printed. Innovative audience members who were aware of activities and ideas circulating outside their immediate network of contacts, would, theoretically, adopt a

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<sup>13</sup> Charles K. Atkin, “Research Evidence on Mass Mediated Communication Campaigns,” *Health Communication Yearbook III* (1979), 355.

<sup>14</sup> Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 63.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond A. Bauer, “The Obstinate Audience: The Influence Process from the Point of View of Social Communication,” *American Psychologist* 19 (1964), 320.

new idea early and then become the source of persuasion for their friends and neighbors.<sup>16</sup>

Such research informed increasingly sophisticated media efforts by Planned Parenthood as they applied the theory in their own work. In 1953 they provided member organizations with a plan for using radio and for expanding into television. The briefing explained that the “so-called ‘mass audience’ reached by some of the commercial shows” was not their only target, but that affiliate groups should also aim to reach the “supporter” audience, “the opinion-moulders in your community” who tune in for panel shows and forums where special guests discuss news items. This represented a shift from the earlier use of the media to target non-literate working-class communities through popular cinema, for example, and extended the more diverse approach used on the radio in the 1930s and 40s which had included expert panelists and lectures as well as soap opera formats. Planned Parenthood enclosed program scripts, announcements, and human interest stories and encouraged affiliates to add their own materials to enhance their local appeal.<sup>17</sup>

The wartime enthusiasm for scientific research, which had fueled the discovery of the atomic bomb and the development of the field of communications, had also generated a growing professional class of experts studying every aspect of human behavior. As the family became the center of American life in peacetime, thanks to the baby boom that had begun during the war and accelerated after its close, Planned Parenthood incorporated research by scientists and sociologists on such

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<sup>16</sup> Everett M. Rogers, *Communication Strategies for Family Planning* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 73.

<sup>17</sup> “Planning Radio and Television to Tell Your Story: A Guide for 1953 Campaign Workers,” Planned Parenthood Federation of America Records, 1918-1974 (hereafter PPFA I), Box 100, Folder 8, p. 3.

issues as infertility, child psychology, and juvenile delinquency into their post-war work. National radio campaign spots of 30 to 60 seconds focused on “marriage education” to help young couples build happy homes, fertility treatment, and “responsible parenthood,” giving families, in consultation with medical experts, the opportunity to plan when to have their first child and to decide how long to wait before having another. Broadcasts emphasized “birth by choice, instead of by chance,” to refer to the full scope of services Planned Parenthood now offered, including infertility treatment as well as family planning, and they focused on the physical and psychological benefits for mothers and children. They also stressed the role of family planning in protecting against broken homes. Extending the concept to national and international security, these programs emphasized the importance of happy, healthy families for strong and stable countries.<sup>18</sup>

The 1953 campaign included fifteen-minute scripted conversations between the radio announcer, a Planned Parenthood officer, and a representative of a particular profession selected from the local community in the region where the show was broadcast. “Parents are Human Too” included a psychiatrist or social worker to discuss the impact of unwanted children. In the case described in the script, a child grows up emotionally insecure as a result of finding out his mother had wanted to give him up for adoption. The parents are also presented as victims of this cruel fate, trying to cope with an expanding family on a fixed salary and suffering guilt about their negative attitude to the new child. The psychiatrist speculates that the situation can even result in the husband deserting his wife. Throughout, the script highlights psychological factors such as the warning that a woman who undergoes an illegal

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<sup>18</sup> Selection of radio spot announcements, PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 8.



abortion may suffer tremendous guilt and “neurotic problems.” Like the anti-abortion preachments of the silent film era, the narrative also threatened sterility for women who underwent the operation. By including this argument, Planned Parenthood affirmed their commitment to planning *for* children, not permanently preventing them. While the inclusion of the psychological reasoning illustrates the high status of scientific thinking at this time, the survival of the moralizing argument against abortion indicates the stigma still surrounding the procedure in the post-war years and Planned Parenthood’s unwillingness to challenge it. Although the organization would later gain the confidence to support abortion (and indeed provide it), they have not maintained a strong and sustained public defense of the procedure since it was legalized, an issue I return to in the conclusion of this study.

Adding a new dimension to the older economic arguments for limiting family size, “Planned Parenthood is Your Business” features a local businessman whose viewpoint is sharpened by child development theories as well as “practical economic considerations.” His script talks about the importance of spacing births to allow families to give each child the care and affection they need, not just financial security. He notes that of the many charities he supports, most are just patching up problems that could have been prevented by family planning. Taking up the question of American consumer capitalism, the business representative argues that while the country’s way of life depends on growing markets, producing too many children does not necessarily mean more consumers but may actually lessen a worker’s buying power. Instead, the family shifts from an economic asset to a liability, reliant on the taxpayer for support for the children they cannot afford to raise.

Connecting dependence at home to the global context, the speaker compares such families to overpopulated nations that will burden the United States. In addition to the usual appeals about the benefits of birth control, radio broadcasts for domestic audiences often included this new emphasis on the importance of family planning around the world, drawing on the explosive metaphor of the population bomb.

It is obvious we cannot afford to have the world breed itself into starvation. Food – or the lack of it – is a weapon. The men behind the iron curtain use this weapon to turn hungry, frustrated people against the free world. They are using population pressures as another force against us. These two weapons – too many people, and not enough food – can explode in all our faces, unless we adjust the scales and make them balance properly!<sup>19</sup>

Despite the urgency of such appeals, the family planning movement's traditional opponent, the Catholic Church, remained resolutely against them. Having gathered useful media experience through their various skirmishes since Margaret Sanger's early attempts to get arrested, family planning advocates quickly turned such barriers into opportunities to maximize their exposure. Just as they had done in the early postwar period, Planned Parenthood encouraged affiliates working in communities with organized opposition to bring influential business leaders to meet station managers, and to invite broadcasters to annual meetings and other events. In the event of a challenge, station managers who had become involved in the movement's activities would be more likely to stand up to critics and continue broadcasting. Local Planned Parenthood groups were to ask their communities to support radio and television stations by sending messages of congratulation after

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<sup>19</sup> "Planned Parenthood is Your Business," PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 8, p. 6.

every broadcast. If necessary, they could even call on the Federation, as experience taught that “a little national leverage often helps solve tough local situations.”<sup>20</sup>

National attention proved helpful in Poughkeepsie, New York, in January 1952, when seven physicians were told to resign their memberships in the Dutchess County League of Planned Parenthood or lose their jobs at St. Francis Hospital. While three physicians temporarily withdrew from the family planning organization, the others steadfastly refused. Ten days into the saga, the story had made national headlines. Planned Parenthood drew on their longtime supporter, radio station WEVD, which hosted a debate questioning whether birth control and religion were compatible.<sup>21</sup> The intensive coverage of the controversy as well as the support of this broadcaster helped keep the issue in front of audiences and stir outrage among members of the public, who decried the influence of Catholics on the medical care of others.<sup>22</sup>

## **Moving Into the Mainstream**

However, while an occasional controversy could prove useful, in the decades after the Second World War Planned Parenthood set their sights on mainstream approval. With a couple of decades of radio broadcasting under their belt, in the 1950s they turned to the new medium of television. The first regular television broadcasts began in 1941, governed by the Communications Code of 1934, which had

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<sup>20</sup> “Planning Radio and Television to Tell Your Story: A Guide for 1953 Campaign Workers,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 8, p.4, quote on p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> They held a similar program after Pope Pius XII addressed midwives in 1951.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 61-71.

established the Federal Communications Commission. As discussed in chapter two, the Code included requirements that broadcasters air educational or public service programs for free as part of their schedules, although the provision had not been rigorously enforced in the radio industry. In television, the public service responsibilities of broadcasters were quickly trounced by the demands of advertisers, who refused to sponsor any programs featuring messages that might attract negative attention from religious or conservative groups. Compared to radio, TV required more personnel, more preparation time to build and dress the set, and more rehearsals (especially of camera movements, for example). Because of the expense, advertising was an accepted part of television broadcasting from the very beginning, taken up to finance programming. This had significant negative consequences for family planning promotion.

As opposed to the radio industry, where the issue of commercialism versus education had been hotly debated, because of the extraordinary costs of television any discussion of its social uses was “muted and timid” in comparison.<sup>23</sup> For the first two decades at least, the TV industry felt little pressure to balance entertainment broadcasting with educational programs on social issues. Mindful of their responsibility to sponsors, broadcasters were especially hesitant to allow birth control programming and had no incentive to do so.

Advertising it as a “window on the world,” manufacturers and broadcasters promoted television as a means to overcome the isolation of family life in suburbia.

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<sup>23</sup> William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 18. Planned Parenthood noted the movement for educational television developing around the country, with 242 licenses issued to educational stations. “Planning Radio and Television to Tell Your Story: A Guide for 1953 Campaign Workers,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 8, p. 8.

Publicity materials represented the medium as a democratic tool, able to connect families, especially the suburban housewife, with the public sphere without the need to actually leave the home.<sup>24</sup> Yet women stuck inside all day with children or household chores did not necessarily want their only interaction with the outside world to come via the television. Such a private, homebound viewing experience offered a distinct contrast to the social activity of movie-going that had captivated an earlier generation of women. Historian Lynn Spigel cites a *Better Homes and Gardens* cartoon from 1951 which summarized the issue cogently: while the male breadwinner dreams of a cozy night in front of the television when he gets home from work, his wife longs to leave the house she has spent the day cleaning for a night out at the movies.<sup>25</sup> Yet television as a vehicle was in many ways particularly suited to family planning campaigns, not only because of its captive female audience. As commentators noted, “TV is an intensely *personal experience*, second only to a face-to-face situation.... It gives an individual in his home the very complete illusion of being spoken to directly.”<sup>26</sup> The technology mimicked the intimacy of radio, while adding the emotional power of visual communication. Of course television was subject to the same standards applied to radio in terms of its suitability for all the family. As a 1954 guide to broadcasting health messages explained, “TV is a *home* medium....[M]aterial must be in good taste, fit for any member of the home to view.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lynn Spigel, “Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955,” in Spigel and Denise Mann, eds., *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Spigel, “Installing the Television Set,” 13.

<sup>26</sup> Roger S. Hall, *Taking Hold of Television* (New York: National Publicity Council for Health and Welfare Services, 1954), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Hall, *Taking Hold of Television*, 66.

There were also many other organizations competing for the limited airtime available for public service broadcasting. For example the American Medical Association, which had previously distributed motion pictures and radio shows, began using television soon after its introduction in the late 1940s to provide training broadcasts for physicians or updates on new medical techniques, and early in the 1950s, the first network series of medical programs for the public, “Here’s to Your Health,” aired on NBC.<sup>28</sup> Health organizations had also begun to professionalize their media efforts to improve their appeal to station managers and target audiences. They drew on the experiences of journalists and professional writers, hiring media specialists to craft their public communications messaging. In a survey of the public relations work of health and welfare organizations, most cited radio or television experience as more important training than previous work in health and welfare.<sup>29</sup> Groups were beginning to develop sophisticated strategies and lining up interesting guests, raising the standard of educational broadcasting in general.<sup>30</sup>

Mastering the medium became especially important as television took over as the leading media format among by American families, with 90 percent of homes owning a set by 1961.<sup>31</sup> But the visual component of television posed particular problems. Communication specialists believed what was seen had a special appeal over and above what was heard, but there were clear limits on the kinds of visuals

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<sup>28</sup> Harriet H. Hester, H.L. Fishel and Martin Magner, *Television in Health Education* (Chicago: American Medical Association, 1955), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Public Relations Society of America and the National Publicity Council for Health and Welfare, *The Organization of Public Relations in Health and Welfare Organizations* (New York, Public Relations Society of America, 1954), 9.

<sup>30</sup> “Planning Radio and Television to Tell Your Story: A Guide for 1953 Campaign Workers,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 8, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> This was up from 10 percent in 1951: Kathryn Montgomery, *Target: Prime Time. Advocacy Groups and the Struggle over Entertainment Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 16.

that could be displayed.<sup>32</sup> The Federal Communications Commission regulations, originally crafted for radio, created mixed messages by prohibiting verbal communication about visual realities. During one series of *I Love Lucy*, for example, actress Lucille Ball was visibly pregnant yet the word itself was banned from the air.<sup>33</sup> In fact, very little was broadcast that could not have been conveyed over radio. Certainly in the early years of the medium, programming strictly followed formats already perfected on the airwaves, such as the expert testimonial, interview, or panel discussion.

The pros and cons of the medium centered on its power to “highlight sincerity” on the one hand, but on the other, to expose the insincere or phony. While they had found some radio formats adaptable, Planned Parenthood soon realized that guests on television programs had to work confidently without scripts and needed to be able to talk easily and naturally to be taken seriously. Yet this was not always possible for the experts they often relied on to promote their cause:

To ask medical authorities to take time from their busy practices to memorize a script is often an imposition. Moreover, these men are not actors. In their effort to work from memory they often become so tense that they do not appear well. On the other hand, reading from script is not their forte.<sup>34</sup>

Ironically, in the age of the expert, medical professionals undermined their own authority by their stilted and awkward appearance.<sup>35</sup> Apparently not yet considering

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<sup>32</sup> Hester et al, *Television in Health Education*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 163.

<sup>34</sup> Hester et al, *Television in Health Education*, 27.

<sup>35</sup> The medical expert was considered so authoritative at this time that advertisers regularly employed a man in a white coat in to promote their products, from over-the-counter health products to cigarettes. In an effort to control the practice, the American Medical Association advised the National Association of Radio and television Broadcasters on a clause for inclusion in their 1952 Television Code, that medical professionals must only speak from personal experiences, or that a dramatized portrayal must

professional actors as an alternative, Planned Parenthood suggested that the visual interest of a broadcast could be enhanced instead by supplementary materials or props, such as photographs, graphs, maps, tables, or diagrams on a blackboard, which needed to be “roughly the same shape as the television screen” for camera close-ups. Evidently, such visual tricks were fairly rudimentary, and mainly supported a lecture or discussion format but did not advance the narrative on their own.

Occasionally, more artful representations were attempted, such as a “successful visual effect” promoted in 1953:

The Seattle Committee had the announcer introduce the Committee’s TV program from down on a rug. He was surrounded by a bi-racial group of four children, ranging from six months to three years of age. The station was delighted with the effect, because of its visual appeal – and it told “our story”.<sup>36</sup>

The demographic mix of the group of children was no accident. The division between black commentators over the value of birth control to their communities, which had pitted W.E.B. Du Bois against other black intellectuals earlier in the century, had only intensified since. The paternalism of the predominantly white family planning movement also fueled opposition. For example, the Negro Project of 1939-1943, an initiative first proposed by Margaret Sanger to promote contraceptive use among African Americans in both urban and rural areas, was reconfigured by the Birth Control Federation of America and became one of their most controversial efforts. Against her advice, the BCFA installed white physicians to administer

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be clearly identified as such. For more on the profession’s attempts to control its representation and limit physicians from demeaning the profession through commercial advertising, see Kelly A. Cole, “Exorcising ‘Men in White’ on Television,” in *Cultural Sutures: Medicine and Media*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> “Planning Radio and Television to Tell Your Story: A Guide for 1953 Campaign Workers,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 8, p. 7.



services, and rejected her proposals to cultivate the support of black communities and to utilize the expertise of black leaders (although they did employ some black nurses, who were more successful than their white male colleagues in recruiting repeat visitors). In the end, the program was developed without any significant input from African American family planning advocates and largely failed to make any long term gains either for the women in the target communities, or in the debate over birth control and race.<sup>37</sup>

The controversy continued in the era of the population bomb and led to charges that Planned Parenthood was engaged in a conspiracy against the black race. Fully exploiting the visual power of television, the broadcast described above sidestepped this controversy by showing children of different races without directly addressing the issue. The overall effect emphasized diverse happy families rather than the prevention of births for any specific group.

### **“A Giant Leap in Public Approval”<sup>38</sup>**

As Planned Parenthood’s general popularity increased, the organization became more confident about directly addressing charged issues, including race, on the nation’s television screens. New opportunities opened up in the late 1950s, when a series of scandals embarrassed television executives and posed the threat of

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<sup>37</sup> See “Birth Control or Race Control? Sanger and the Negro Project,” *Margaret Sanger Papers Project Newsletter* 28 (Fall 2001) for a concise summary of the program. Scholars and others advancing the idea that Planned Parenthood, and Sanger in particular, were motivated by racism, continue to cite the program as evidence they intended to severely restrict black reproduction, an interpretation unsupported by archival evidence and the more nuanced studies by historians such as Johanna Schoen’s *Choice & Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) and Carol McCann’s *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> Martha Stuart, “Preliminary World’s Fair Report,” 14 June 1965, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 18, Folder titled “World’s Fair PPWP Booth,” p. 2.

regulatory reforms. After the quiz show debacle of 1958, in which it was revealed that contestants on numerous shows, including *The \$64,000 Question* and its imitators, had been coached on the correct answers, the National Association of Broadcasters launched a \$600,000 public relations campaign to improve the image of the industry. The group reaffirmed broadcasters' commitment to cultural and public service programs to ease the outcry. Criticism of bland programming and an anticipated plateau of advertising revenue also contributed to their conciliatory attitude.<sup>39</sup>

In 1958 and 1959, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) held public hearings into the misconduct, during which witnesses testified to the failure of television broadcasters to produce public service programming for fear of offending their sponsors. In his testimony, Charles Siepman, a proponent of educational broadcasting, decried "the narrowing, to a near vanishing point, of areas of controversy."<sup>40</sup> As a result of the scandals the chair of the FCC resigned. In 1961, his replacement, Newton F. Minow, declared television a "vast wasteland" in his first major speech.<sup>41</sup> In stark contrast to the critics in the early years of the motion picture, Minow bemoaned the cautiousness and timidity of a medium in thrall to its commercial sponsors. Far from breaking new ground and risking censorship by pushing the boundaries of acceptability (as the motion picture, and to a lesser extent radio, had done), television was not even keeping up with changing public expectations for the medium's informative potential. Such calls intensified in the 1960s, as Civil Rights groups, feminists, and other activists of the new social

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<sup>39</sup> William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 220.

<sup>40</sup> "Moral Aspects of Television," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1960): 15.

<sup>41</sup> Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 244.

movements challenged the lack of coverage of their activities, and denounced negative representations of women and minorities in programming and the absence of a diverse workforce behind-the-scenes in television production.<sup>42</sup>

The new desire among broadcasters to prove themselves responsible and relevant created opportunities for health-related programming. As historian Julie Passanante Elman has described in her article on ABC Television's *After School Specials*, the 1970s thus saw the proliferation of, in her words, "medicalized edutainment."<sup>43</sup> As the wealth of scholarship on medicine and media illustrates, this was not a new phenomenon. For the first time, however, this was spearheaded by broadcasters themselves (rather than health or advocacy organizations), and crafted with attention to communication theories devised explicitly for health-related material.

Most significantly for family planning promoters, broadcasters proposed moving away from single sponsors of specific programs to adopt a magazine format, in which advertisers bought commercial spots between programming.<sup>44</sup> The strategy was cheaper and did not tie the advertiser so closely to the content of the program, making it more affordable and less risky for companies purchasing broadcasting time. The old sponsorship system had ensured that sexual topics were more strictly censored on television than in film, radio, or theatre, whereas the new approach might prove more accommodating to those groups whose messages often made the advertisers nervous.

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<sup>42</sup> James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), chap. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Elman, "After School Special Education: Rehabilitative Television, Teen Citizenship, and Compulsory Able-Bodiedness," *Television and New Media* 20, no. 10 (2010): 2.

<sup>44</sup> Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 198.

Of course another force propelling more candid discussion of sexual subjects on television was the era's sexual revolution, in which standards of propriety relaxed and "sex was put on display" across American culture.<sup>45</sup> The increasing representation of sexuality in media that had begun with the pin-ups of the Second World War was led in peacetime by the launch of *Playboy* magazine and a "sex sells" approach to consumer advertising.<sup>46</sup> Sexologist Alfred Kinsey's 1948 publication *Sexuality and the Human Male*, and his 1953 follow-up on female sexuality, had highlighted a wide gulf between conservative proscription regarding sexual behavior and the more liberal practices of a majority of Americans.<sup>47</sup> Illustrating the new attitude and behavior was the popularity of the first contraceptive pill, Enovid, approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960, which quickly became the leading contraceptive of choice among American women.<sup>48</sup>

Political impetus also helped increase access to family planning resources, in part due to the fear that poor and minority women were reproducing too rapidly. As historian Rickie Solinger has shown, conservative politicians blamed black single mothers with children for financial dependency and political unrest in the country's urban ghettos. In fact, for many opponents of birth control, these fears overtook their longstanding concerns that contraception licensed immoral sexual behavior. Illinois

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<sup>45</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 277.

<sup>46</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, *Sex Sells! : The Media's Journey from Repression to Obsession* (Basic Books, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> Although widely known as the Kinsey reports, both were co-authored with his fellow researchers Paul H. Gebhard, Clyde E. Martin and Wardell B. Pomeroy.

<sup>48</sup> By 1965 one quarter of couples used the pill, making it the most popular form of contraception. C. F. Westoff and N. B. Ryder, "United States: Methods of Fertility Control, 1955, 1960, and 1965," *Studies in Family Planning* 17, (1967): 1-5. On the history of the development of the pill, see Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, *On the Pill: A History of Oral Contraceptives 1950-1970* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) and Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001), chaps. 9 and 10.

State Senator Morgan Findlay, for example, opposed subsidized contraception for poor unwed women in 1963 but changed sides two years later, on the grounds that it was the lesser of two evils.<sup>49</sup> Before 1960, only seven states (all in the south) regularly included family planning as a part of public health services, but in the next five years another twenty-five and the District of Columbia added such programs.<sup>50</sup> In 1965, the final vestiges of Comstockery were swept away by the Supreme Court's decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which overturned the last remaining U.S. state law banning physicians from prescribing contraception.

The same year, the National Academy of Sciences issued a report on the growth of population in the United States calling for "the inclusion of population studies and the principles of responsible parenthood in the curricula of colleges, universities, and secondary schools, and continued discussion in magazines, the daily press, and on radio and television."<sup>51</sup> This proved to be a critical turning point for the Federation. Planned Parenthood began to supply nearly 200 of their affiliate organizations with TV and radio spots, along with distributing their usual print materials, including "transportation car cards," posters and newspaper advertisements. Staffing their booth at the World's Fair in 1965, Martha Stuart, a former journalist hired as a communications consultant, reported "a giant leap in public approval" in comparison to the previous year. Many attendees said that they had already heard about the organization's work through television, and Stuart

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<sup>49</sup> Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up, Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 207.

<sup>50</sup> Solinger, *Wake Up, Little Susie*, 213. Although states had been allowed to use federal grants for family planning programs since the 1930s, few had done so.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in letter from Winfield Best to Raymond A. Lamontagne, 2 February 1967, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 18, Folder "Radio and TV PPWP."

credited the mass media with improving people's ability to react "without embarrassment" to the exhibition at the fair. As a result, for the first time, the staff distributed pamphlets describing specific methods of birth control.<sup>52</sup> The shift in opinion was evident even among those groups traditionally most resistant to Planned Parenthood's message. Seventy-five percent of Catholics polled by Gallup supported the dissemination of birth control information to anyone who wanted it, up from 53 percent just two years earlier.<sup>53</sup>

Gradually, broadcasters took advantage of the changing atmosphere to air related programming, even without the specific request of Planned Parenthood. Capitalizing on her position within the nation's leading birth control advocacy group, Martha Stuart was sure to write and congratulate them on behalf of the organization. Whenever stations contacted her to propose their own programs, she provided the names of possible speakers and offered to recommend particular shows to the organization's entire mailing list.<sup>54</sup> The receptive climate, combined with the post-scandal call for more adventurous programming, meant that media outlets were now interested in exploiting the most controversial aspects of the campaign for family planning as a means to attract viewers. The strategy that Sanger had once employed to gain press attention and which had no doubt sold newspapers (and cinema tickets) back in the early days of the campaign for birth control, was now explicitly deployed by broadcasters themselves looking for a new angle.

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<sup>52</sup> Martha Stuart, "Preliminary World's Fair Report," 14 June 1965, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 18, Folder titled "World's Fair PPWP Booth," p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Bernard Berelson, "American Attitudes on Population Policy," *Studies in Family Planning* 1, no. 9 (1966): 5.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Stuart to Milton Wayne, ABC, 18 November 1966 and Stuart to Thomas Moore, President of ABC, 9 January 1967, Planned Parenthood Federation of America Papers 1921-1981 (hereafter PPFA II), Box 18, Folder "Stuart, Martha."

Amidst the struggle for Civil Rights, the issue of family planning and race remained a provocative topic. While Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X supported it, the Black Panthers and nationalist movements such as the Nation of Islam considered contraception part of a white genocidal plot and advocated procreation to increase their ranks.<sup>55</sup> Although women in these movements tended to side with the male leadership, other black female activists emphasized the importance of women's right to choose for themselves. Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, later honored by Planned Parenthood for her support of their work, spoke out about black women's experiences of botched abortions and argued that racial progress was better served by smaller families, where children could be well-educated, than by parents who could barely afford to feed and clothe their large families.<sup>56</sup> The split led to widely divergent attitudes towards contraception, and its uneven availability, in black communities.<sup>57</sup>

Rather than sidestepping the issue as they had in the 1950s, Planned Parenthood was happy to help broadcasters exploit the potential of the subject to

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<sup>55</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., advocated black control of reproduction and rejected "population breeding as a weapon." "Family Planning – A Special Urgent Concern," (New York: Planned Parenthood-World Population, 1966), 5. King supported the work of Planned Parenthood and in 1966 received their Margaret Sanger Award in Human Rights. Malcolm X denounced the term "birth control" because of its implications of control over black fertility but implicitly endorsed family planning, although he was critical of the international emphasis on curbing population growth primarily among nations of people of color. Wylda B. Cowles, Memo to Dr. Alan F. Guttmacher concerning the Interview with Malcolm X, 29 May 1962, cited in Robert G. Weisbord, "Birth Control and the Black American: A Matter of Genocide?" *Demography* 10, no. 4 (1973), 581.

<sup>56</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed* (New York: Avon Books, 1970), 124-136.

<sup>57</sup> While a family planning clinic in Cleveland, Ohio was burnt down by arsonists in the Civil Rights riots of 1968, for example, during eight days of violence in a poor Detroit neighborhood business on either side of a church and a family planning center were left untouched, while the rest of the block was looted and burnt. Weisbord, "Birth Control and the Black American," 571. See also Gary D. London, "Family Planning Programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity: Scope, Operation, and Impact," *Demography* 5, no. 2 (1968): 928.

attract viewers. As Stuart wrote in response to an NBC request for suggestions in 1966,

Dr. Jerome K. Holland, President of Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia, long time board member of Planned Parenthood... could address himself to the birth control or not question which would lend some controversy. He also happens to be Negro and could speak on the topic of the minority groups and their use of birth control (which happens, as a matter of fact, to be a rather hotly discussed matter sometimes because there are some minority group leaders who feel that birth control is some sort of White plot to eliminate them).<sup>58</sup>

Including a respected black professional also served to counter the organization's image as a white-oriented group with a secret agenda against black Americans, a characterization that flourished even during the 1978-1992 presidency of Faye Watteton, the first African American and second woman (after Sanger) to lead Planned Parenthood, and which survives to this day.<sup>59</sup>

Stuart appropriated the new enthusiasm for edgy programming to fight bad publicity. In June 1967, when an article in *Ladies Home Journal* presented the oral contraceptive pill in a negative light, she wrote to NBC and CBS to suggest speakers who could "contribute more facts to this controversy."<sup>60</sup> The end result was a heated panel debate in which physicians took the author to task for her selective use of data and inflammatory remarks.

Planned Parenthood launched a new era of birth control media in the late 1960s, after President Lyndon Johnson highlighted the importance of access to family planning as a crucial component of his War on Poverty in 1966. The following year

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<sup>58</sup> Stuart to Steve Bauman NBC, 27 December 1966, PPFA II, Box 18, Folder F, "Stuart, Martha."

<sup>59</sup> As I discussed in the introduction to this study, historians remain divided over the motivations driving the family planning movement over the course of the twentieth century.

<sup>60</sup> Lois R. Chevalier and Leonard Cohen, "The Terrible Trouble with the Birth-Control Pills," *Ladies' Home Journal* (July 1967): 44-45; PPFA II, Box 18, Folder "Stuart, Martha."



the government began funding domestic programs to provide affordable contraception.<sup>61</sup> These breakthroughs brought an end to the public relations phase of breaking down barriers to family planning and paved the way to advance more specific program goals, including increased government involvement and population and family planning education in schools.<sup>62</sup> Planned Parenthood also ventured into new areas of broadcasting, such as Spanish-language programming.<sup>63</sup> The organization formalized its media efforts in an expanded Information and Education Department and launched two major initiatives to inaugurate the next phase: national advertising campaigns and the use of fiction programming for the delivery of family planning messages.

## **Family Planning Advertising**

Extensive national broadcasting became a possibility for the first time in 1968, when the Advertising Council, a private non-profit organization formed in 1942 to develop public service advertisements, added Planned Parenthood to its TV-Radio Bulletin for the first time. Broadcasters made selections from this list of organizations to fulfill their public service requirements. The addition of Planned Parenthood had an immediate impact, with all the networks and 300 local stations airing their broadcasts that year. The wide use of their two advertisements, an animated cartoon

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<sup>61</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Domestic Health and Education Message to Congress," March 1, 1966. The 1967 Amendments to the Social Security Act, which had bipartisan support as a solution to poverty and illegitimate births, endorsed federal funding for family planning. The first direct federal grant to a local family planning program was awarded by the Office of Economic Opportunity in December, 1964, to an organization in Corpus Christi, Texas. Gary D. London, "Family Planning Programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity: Scope, Operation, and Impact," *Demography* 5, no 2 (1968): 924.

<sup>62</sup> Winfield Best to Mr. Raymond A. Lamontagne, 2 February 1967, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 18, Folder titled "Radio and TV PPWP."

<sup>63</sup> William Clark to Winfield Best, 1 September 1966, PPFA II, Box 18, Folder "Stuart, Martha."

and an endorsement of Planned Parenthood's work by Dwight D. Eisenhower, as well as the absence of any backlash, encouraged Planned Parenthood to develop a major national television campaign.

The result was a pair of advertisements aimed at recruiting new patients to clinics. The broadcasts, both made in twenty and sixty-second versions at a total cost of twenty thousand dollars, were strategically designed and carefully tested. According to those regional Planned Parenthood affiliates tracking the campaign, both led to a significant increase in requests for appointments and information.<sup>64</sup> The first advertisement featured testimonials by real patients describing their experiences at Planned Parenthood clinics. Forty of the forty-two women invited to participate had accepted immediately, and all expressed great enthusiasm for the organization's work. Unfortunately, some of the material the producers thought most appealing was considered unsuitable for broadcast by the Advertising Council. This included "the darling young thing who spontaneously blurted out how joyously she now goes to bed with her husband, in contrast to the time when she worried about getting pregnant again."<sup>65</sup> With such exhortations off-limits, Planned Parenthood instead selected clips where women emphasized the professionalism of clinic staff and the safety of various contraceptive techniques they used. The second advertisement dramatized the daily activities of the clinic, showing a female switchboard operator providing information to a caller, as the facilities and the various stages of a patient visit are visualized on

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<sup>64</sup> This occurred despite an official statement by the Vatican against contraception which was widely publicized in the same period. After various overtures from the Catholic Church family planning advocates expected Pope Paul VI to provide some room for personal decision-making. Instead, in his *Humanae Vitae* of July 25, 1968 he took a hard line on the subject. This restatement of traditional doctrine clashed with the changing atmosphere of the sexual revolution.

<sup>65</sup> Jean Hutchinson, "Using TV to Recruit Family Planning Patients," *Family Planning Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (1970): 9.

the screen. This clinic operator approach was more “strictly informational” than the testimonial spot, although in the end it proved more effective. Media advisors all preferred it, explaining that overuse of the testimonial by advertisers had made the public “wise and jaded” about that strategy:

*They know you just hired an actress to say her hands were soft with ivory, her tummy serene with Alka-Seltzer and her birth control safe and effective. They don’t believe it for a minute, even if they like your message.*<sup>66</sup>

As audiences became increasingly aware of the tricks of the trade, Planned Parenthood had to work harder to distinguish themselves from the techniques of consumer advertising and to construct persuasive approaches. Beginning in 1969, in conjunction with the Advertising Council, Planned Parenthood’s new Information and Education Department developed a three-year campaign for network radio and television, regional broadcasters, and major newspapers and magazines. The project’s central goal was to establish the small family as “the most desirable and fashionable family for the future,” going beyond informing audiences about services to try and influence attitudes more proactively. Some Planned Parenthood staff saw any such activity as unethical and in violation of the organization’s commitment to the principle of voluntary family planning. Reactions were extreme. As one physician wrote after hearing the proposals,

*Hitler would have been proud.... I cannot work with or for an organization which chooses to deal in propaganda, the purpose of which is to subtly coerce people to accept a given point of view.”*<sup>67</sup>

While propaganda had played an essential role in America’s war effort and was widely deployed by the Office of War Information, evidence of its sophisticated

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<sup>66</sup> Hutchinson, “Using TV to Recruit Family Planning Patients,” 11.

<sup>67</sup> Walter C. Rogers, M.D. to John Robbins, “Jack Scanlon’s proposed media campaign,” 11 May 1970, PPFA II, Box 64, Folder 34, p. 2.

use by the Germans created fear and revulsion of the tactic in the postwar years. The Nazi example of the extreme applications of eugenic theory in their policy of racial hygiene tarnished the idea of controlling the fertility of populations, rather than simply giving groups the means to plan their families as they so desired.<sup>68</sup> The proposed Planned Parenthood campaign, according to some staff, would damage the organization's credibility and offend people with large families while condemning them to public scorn. As another critic asked pointedly, drawing on imagery of victimization and racial discrimination and tying the issue to the contentious question of race politics and birth control in the United States, "into whose window will we throw rocks, on what lawn dump garbage or burn crosses?"<sup>69</sup>

Concern was also mounting among many in the broader community of population specialists that the threat of overpopulation had been exaggerated, especially within the country, where the birth rate, considered alongside life expectancy and mortality statistics, was approaching the level of replacement rather than growth. In 1972, when this balance was achieved and the news was widely publicized, the population bomb argument fell apart, at least at home. Having sacrificed the sexual liberation argument justifying family planning way back when Sanger first sought alliances with elite society and the medical profession, and having tied themselves so tightly to the overpopulation issue in the postwar period, the movement was now left without an explanation for the merits of freely available contraceptive services.

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<sup>68</sup> While eugenics had been endorsed by respectable professionals earlier in the twentieth century recognition of its genocidal applications under Nazism destroyed its credibility after the Second World War.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Lincoln to John C. Robbins, "Population Education Program," 18 May 1970, PPFA II, Box 64, Folder 34.

On the positive side, evidence was mounting that media persuasion might hold greater potential than the postwar pessimism had suggested. The doubts of the 1950s and the idea of “limited effects” began to shift as data from a series of new media efforts once again suggested modest gains in influence. The most convincing examples came from the relatively new field of health communication, in campaigns to lower heart attack risk behaviors, prevent smoking, and encourage seatbelt use. Recovering from their postwar crisis of confidence, researchers began to gather evidence that the media was in fact effective in delivering public health information, providing that the messages were straightforward and repeated regularly in a manner that reached the intended audience. As a result of this research, by the early 1970s communications experts were expressing cautious optimism that “mass media campaigns can be *moderately* successful *under certain conditions* [emphasis mine],” an idea long endorsed by commercial advertisers, of course.<sup>70</sup> With more Americans receiving messages (accurate and inaccurate) about drugs, alcohol, sex, and dangerous behavior from entertainment television than any other source, the medium was becoming a critical tool in the battle for influence.

The precise elements of an effective strategy, however, were still hotly debated. Some communications experts recommended the use of humor, for example, while others insisted on a more solemn, or even fear-inducing, approach. Although celebrity spokespeople garnered audience attention (a fact exploited by Planned Parenthood early on in their use of actor Charlton Heston in a television advertisement), “ordinary” people the target audience could more easily identify with

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<sup>70</sup> Charles K. Atkin, “Research Evidence on Mass Mediated Communication Campaigns,” *Health Communication Yearbook III* (1979), 355.

often had more credibility with viewers. Whatever the technique used, broadcasts had to rise to the standard of surrounding programming and compensate for the cynicism of an increasingly sophisticated audience.

Planned Parenthood senior staff member Fred Jaffe, who claimed more than twenty years experience in communications and media, worried that the new campaign signaled a step backwards to a less sophisticated era. Jaffe damned the Advertising Council campaign in the same terms that had dogged birth control media way back in the early twentieth century:

I am most appalled by the amateurishness of the ads. Almost every one of them is a direct preachment.... The genius of American advertising (if it has any) is precisely that it avoids preaching and gets its message across by suggestion, implication or persuasion, allowing the audience essentially to make its own decisions about the wisest course of action for them. Even the anti-smoking ads do not contain a direct injunction to the viewer to stop smoking.

In his opinion, then, persuasion was not off-limits if undertaken carefully and subtly. But direct appeals, which could be seen as a more straightforward approach, were too blatant and too “preachy.”<sup>71</sup> As critics had complained earlier in the century, “preachments” ruined entertainment if didacticism overtook the dramatic narrative.

Despite the negative responses within the organization, the campaign went ahead under the leadership of Robin Elliot, director of the Information and Education Department, and the Richard K. Manoff advertising agency. While the specific approaches used in the draft proposals were re-crafted, the general strategy remained intact. Notably, the campaign stayed away from the “panic approach” of the population bomb and did not target any one group, poor or wealthy, white or black,

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<sup>71</sup> Fred Jaffe to John Robbins, “Confidential Memorandum,” 1 Feb 1971, PPFA II, Box 62, Folder 50, pp. 1-2.

emphasizing instead the universal desire to plan a family. The campaign focused on three groups: opinion makers, couples, and young people. Rather than proposing a particular family size as the ideal or suggesting the best age to have a child, most emphasized the importance of planning, including messages such as “an unexpected child can really rock the cradle,” and “get to know the two of you before you become the three of you.” The messages focused on the financial toll of unplanned pregnancy and its impact on lifestyle, career choices, and relationships. One television advertisement showed a young man navigating a giant Monopoly board, moving money from categories for education, doctor’s bills, and a family vacation in response to unexpected pregnancies.<sup>72</sup>

As with the testimonial advertisement a year earlier, messages with sexual connotations were dropped at the behest of the Advertising Council, which rejected the proposed headline, “one thing about the ‘population problem,’ you don’t have to get out of bed to fight it.”<sup>73</sup> The more conservative strategy helped Planned Parenthood win over the networks, and once the campaign was up and running, it generated little opposition. The compromise seems rather one-sided, however, given the growing sexualization of other media. Broadcasters were seemingly happier to flout convention when it came to commercial programming, but timid to do so in an educational or public service context. The issue is likely to have come down to two factors: the greater revenue generated by commercial shows (which could be re-sold if they proved popular with audiences), and the problems associated with explicitly putting forth a particular agenda in public service announcements. While conservative

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<sup>72</sup> Robin Elliott, “Advertising Family Planning,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (1971): 65-67.

<sup>73</sup> Philip H. Dougherty, “Birth Control Campaign Set,” *New York Times*, 5 October 1971.

groups did criticize sex merely for profit in entertainment and advertising, they leveled their most aggressive campaigns against family planning promotion.

### **Putting Abortion on the Air**

While criticism and censorship did not shut down the national advertising campaign, these challenges clearly framed the kind of messaging and the types of broadcasts that could be undertaken. Feeling constrained by such limitations, some family planning promoters sought new avenues for experimentation. Planned Parenthood was increasingly out of step with the goals and activities of the women's movement as the latter took on the campaign for abortion rights. Martha Stuart, the organization's one-time communications consultant, left to found her own company focused on more explicitly feminist goals, including a direct campaign to destigmatize abortion. Her medium of choice, selected for its emotional impact, was television. As she explained,

Television has been used primarily to transmit information. It has been perceived only as a cognitive medium. But television's greatest potential, we believe, is in reaching people at the deeper, "affective" level. Conventional cognitive television can modify what people know and think. 'Affective' television can modify what people feel and do.<sup>74</sup>

After leaving Planned Parenthood, Stuart took up family planning as part of an "affective" television series she developed, called *Are You Listening?* As well as reproductive health issues, the series included programs on prisoners, black mothers

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<sup>74</sup> "Premise and Method," p. 2. Martha Stuart Papers, Box 18 Folder titled "C for C, The First Four Years."



on welfare, and the police. Cutting through the political rhetoric and media hype that surrounded contentious topics, each show presented an opportunity for viewers to hear from people who had been scapegoated or stereotyped—those known only as “objects of the angry national debate.” As she explained in the introduction to each episode, “I want you to get to know them as people.” Abortion had only been discussed occasionally on television in the preceding years as individual states began to reform abortion law, although predominantly within factual rather than entertainment programming.<sup>75</sup> Compelling examples of the need for reform had also made news headlines, such as the case of Sherri Finkbine, a married mother of four who was forced to travel to Sweden to terminate her fifth pregnancy after discovering that the thalidomide she had taken was liable to have caused significant damage to her fetus. As individual states passed new laws and press coverage of the debate heated up, dramatic shows also picked up the topic. In the 1960s, for example, CBS aired an episode of *The Defenders* called “The Benefactor,” in which a physician is arrested for performing abortions. All of the show’s sponsors canceled their advertisements, and affiliate stations in Boston, Providence, Rochester and elsewhere refused to air the episode.<sup>76</sup> Despite such outcomes, writers continued to capitalize on audience

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<sup>75</sup> State reforms began with Colorado in 1967, soon followed by California. In 1968 and 1969, seven more states passed reforms. In 1970, after New York State enacted the most progressive abortion law in the nation, allowing licensed physicians to perform an abortion through the 24th week of pregnancy, Planned Parenthood of Syracuse became the first Planned Parenthood affiliate to offer abortion services.

Four documentaries aired between 1965 and 1972. The first television program on the topic, a 15-minute drama titled “Abortion: A look into the Illegal Abortion Racket,” appeared on the syndicated program *Confidential File*. Julie D’Acci, “Leading up to *Roe v. Wade*: Television Documentaries in the Abortion Debate,” in *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist critical essays*, eds. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 123. The first network broadcast on the issue, “Abortion and the Law” was written by a progressive journalist and filmmaker, David Lowe, and narrated by Walter Cronkite, for *CBS Reports*.

<sup>76</sup> Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York University Press, 2005), 180-181. In 1971, at least two dramatic programs with an apparently

interest in the issue by inserting it into established programming. The campaign to reform abortion law was thus helped along by media programming undertaken without the direct involvement of Planned Parenthood.

Feminist scholar Julie D'Acci argues that the early, news-oriented abortion-related broadcasting established how American television would frame the debate and who would be invited to speak about it, and that this pattern served to marginalize feminist viewpoints and women. Stuart set out to transform this context, arguing that “to speak humanely and helpfully” about pregnancy termination, “a shift in the terms of public discussion” was required.<sup>77</sup> In 1972 she produced “Women Who Have Had an Abortion,” one of three shows she developed on the subject. The episodes did not focus on the political leaders or medical experts who commonly framed the news coverage and had appeared in Planned Parenthood’s own broadcasting, but instead brought together people with personal experience of the issue. This was an important shift in approach that reflected the trends in the feminist movement and particularly the model of “speaking out” by which women in consciousness-raising groups came to understand the structural (rather than personal) nature of their oppression by sharing their experiences with one another.<sup>78</sup> As historian Leslie Reagan has remarked, speak-outs were an important political tactic because they “took abortion

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anti-abortion stance had aired, along with just one show supporting abortion rights. “A Brand New Life” and the first episode of “Marcus Welby, M.D.,” were anti-abortion, “The Bold Ones” was pro-choice, Mrs. Theodore O. Wedel, Letter to the Editor, 21 November 1973, PPFA II, Box 64, Folder 46.

<sup>77</sup> Untitled document, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 12, Folder titled “Women Who Didn’t Have An Abortion,” p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> For a discussion of the importance of consciousness-raising in feminist organizing see Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Sandra Morgen, *Into Our Own Hands: The Women's Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002) and Susan Wells, *Our Bodies, Ourselves and the Work of Writing* (California: Stanford University Press, 2010).

out of the realm of private secrets and made it an issue that women could talk about in public,” just as early twentieth-century media campaigns had transformed the topic of birth control.<sup>79</sup> Stuart broadcast these conversations, expanding the audience for such disclosures significantly. She selected participants who illustrated the diversity of the abortion experience, and their willingness to come forward cut through the stigma and secrecy normally surrounding the subject. More than a simple (and by now, ineffective) testimonial, the format allowed participants to question and challenge one another and to express ambivalence or change their opinions during the episode.

Other family planning advocates outside Planned Parenthood who had greater freedom than those within the organization to experiment began to look for ways to integrate their messages within entertainment programming, in a separate effort to move away from the didactic format of advertising or public service announcements. The opportunities were slim in dramatic genres. Even when competing for audiences, television writers shied away from sex-related subjects. CBS staff who reviewed materials for broadcast (a procedure introduced after the quiz scandals of the 1950s) reported they “avoid sex, but go the violent route because of greater social tolerance” in an effort to attract viewers.<sup>80</sup> This phenomenon was apparent across the networks.

Family planning promoters working in a variety of organizations, as well as Planned Parenthood affiliates, set out to overturn this by actively seeking out writers to tackle the issue in fiction programming on the small screen. David Poindexter, a media specialist in the Methodist Church who served on the National Council of

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<sup>79</sup> Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (California: University of California Press, 1998), 230.

<sup>80</sup> George Gerbner, “The Structure and Process of Television Program Content Regulation in the United States,” in George A. Comstock and Eli A. Rubenstein, eds., *Television and Social Behavior Volume I: Media Content and Control* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1972): 403.

Churches' Broadcasting and Film Commission, had worked as official liaison to CBS news in the 1960s advising on the presentation of religious issues. In 1970, he became director of a new Population Communication Center within the Methodist Church, supported by a secular organization based in Washington DC, called the Population Institute. Poindexter organized a meeting in 1971, attended by John D. Rockefeller III, (chairman of the President's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future and founder of the Population Council), Senator Robert Packwood (R-Oregon), and George H. W. Bush, chairman of the Republican National Committee, as well as top executives from all three television networks, to establish a commitment among broadcasters to air programs related to family planning. The successful meeting was followed by several conferences with television writers and producers in New York and Los Angeles and the launch of a prize fund allocating \$10,000 for the best hour-long primetime program and \$5000 each for the best half-hour program and series episode during the 1972-73 season.<sup>81</sup>

In response, in 1972 producer Norman Lear developed two episodes of the sitcom *Maude*, first broadcast on CBS, in which the title character decides to terminate her pregnancy and persuades her husband to have a vasectomy.<sup>82</sup> The Los Angeles chapter of Planned Parenthood served as technical consultants on the script. The series was a spin-off from the breakthrough hit *All in the Family*, which had launched a year earlier and become the first successful situation comedy to regularly

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<sup>81</sup> For a full account of Poindexter's work to establish the issue among broadcasters see his chapter, "A History of Entertainment-Education, 1958-2000," in Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel Sabido, eds., *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

<sup>82</sup> Where archival or published sources are not specifically cited in my discussion of the origins and impact of *Maude* I am drawing from Kathryn C. Montgomery's interviews with key figures at the Population Institute and CBS described in *Target: Prime Time. Advocacy Groups and the Struggle over Entertainment Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), chap. 3.

tackle controversial topics, reaching number one in the ratings by the end of the first season. The show's popularity paved the way for others to take on difficult issues, and by 1972 twenty new series were tackling topics that had been previously off-limits, such as lesbianism, venereal disease, and embryo transplantation. Thanks to the work of David Poindexter and his allies, *Maude* was one of four programs addressing aspects of the family planning issue in the fall of 1972.<sup>83</sup>

Lear enjoyed an unusual level of autonomy that may have helped him get abortion on the air. His volatile behavior in disagreements with executives and the popularity of his programs made it unprofitable for the network to challenge him, and his technique of videotaping episodes before a live audience on a weekly production schedule, rather than filming weeks in advance, made it difficult to track exactly what he was up to in the studio. Even so, writers were now required to submit scripts for review, and Lear would not be able to get around this requirement on such a hot topic. In the end, after their plans to postpone the episodes failed, reviewers at CBS instead insisted on the introduction of a character who went ahead with an unplanned pregnancy. Under the Federal Communication Commission's Fairness Doctrine, introduced in 1949 but not formally adopted into regulations until 1967, broadcasters tackling controversial issues had to give equivalent time to competing points of view. This strategy became the key formula used in the new, bolder broadcasting initiated by *All in the Family* to head off criticism.

Lear complied with the FCC, but Planned Parenthood's Information and Education Department anticipated opposition to the program and circulated an action

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<sup>83</sup> The others were *All in the Family*, *Mash*, and *Mary Tyler Moore*. Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel Sabido, eds., *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 25.

memo. The memo proposed that individual members write to local network affiliates, to the head of standards and practices at CBS, and to the FCC to endorse the first show and to prevent protesters from interfering with the broadcast of the second episode. Population Institute and Planned Parenthood staff also campaigned against network affiliates who refused to broadcast *Maude* in their communities. After the first episode aired, 373 callers rang CBS to express their anger, and over the next few days Lear and the network received hundreds of letters (eventually numbering 24,000), including one package of photographs of aborted fetuses. In 1971, Cincinnati physician Dr. Jack Wilke and his wife Barbara, both of whom had campaigned against contraception and pornography as part of a broader movement against sex education, had introduced such graphic images into public discourse for the first time in their *Handbook on Abortion*.<sup>84</sup> At issue for most letter writers, both supporters and opponents, was whether a comedy was the right forum for such a serious issue, with abortion and vasectomy “no laughing matter.”<sup>85</sup> An article in the Jesuit publication *America* declared that if the topic had been treated in a serious drama, or in a panel discussion of experts, it would have provoked “only marginal objection.” The problem was the comedy format of the show.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, Catholic organizations mounted the most aggressive counter-campaign, arguing that true balance could only be achieved by devoting two more episodes to Maude herself deciding to have a baby, or by allowing an anti-abortion program to air in the time slot for the series. When CBS refused, they complained to

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<sup>84</sup> See Andrew H. Merton, *Enemies of Choice: The Right-to-Life Movement and its Threat to Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981) for an overview of the anti-abortion movement.

<sup>85</sup> PPFA II, Box 64, Folder 46. Planned Parenthood documented the response as part of their efforts to evaluate the viability of a television campaign on family planning.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Montgomery, *Target: Prime Time*, 37.

the FCC on the grounds that the Fairness Doctrine had been violated. The network based its defense on the same grounds on which the criticisms had been made. They argued that *Maude* was “solely intended for entertainment and not for the discussion of viewpoints on controversial issues of public importance,” agreeing by implication, then, that the abortion plotline was a merely a dramatic, rather than educational, element.<sup>87</sup>

Certainly entertainment programming could include little of the technical detail of the issue or convey the complex range of differing opinions as Martha Stuart’s series had done. However, the potential of commercial television remained a tantalizing one for family planning promoters, even despite, or perhaps because of, the controversy such issues on popular shows could generate. In an effort to stop the turmoil from scaring other broadcasters off the topic, Norman Fleishman, director of the Los Angeles chapter of Planned Parenthood, organized a party in support of Lear. It generated such enthusiasm that he decided to hold such events regularly. In 1970 the Population Institute had set up a West Coast office (later headed by Fleishman), which by 1977 had awarded \$100,000 to broadcasters tackling aspects of family planning and international population. Other organizations also continued to promote the topic in Hollywood into the 1980s.<sup>88</sup>

On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court decided the case of *Roe vs. Wade*, legalizing abortion across the country. Initially, the new climate had a positive impact on family planning broadcasting. In June, the FCC ruled against anti-abortionists’ complaints about *Maude*. The decision affirmed that the Fairness Doctrine did apply

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Montgomery, *Target: Prime Time*, 36.

<sup>88</sup> See Montgomery, *Target: Prime Time*, chap. 9.

to entertainment programming just as it had to factual broadcasting, but asserted that balance need not be exhibited within the same program so long as it was evident in the schedule as a whole. All of this paved the way for rebroadcast of the episodes in the summer rerun of the series, creating a total of 140 million viewers, 80 million of whom watched both the original broadcast and the repeat.<sup>89</sup> But the breakthrough was short-lived. The national legalization of abortion also galvanized the anti-abortion movement. Over the next few years, as the backlash intensified, family planning in the media, especially abortion, became a riskier proposition for broadcasters.

### **Planned Parenthood Enters the Abortion Wars**

After spending decades seeking to disassociate birth control from abortion, in the early 1970s Planned Parenthood stepped into the middle of the controversy, as the Children's Television Workshop (CTW), the production company behind the successful series *Sesame Street*, began to explore the potential use of their model of educational television to promote healthy behaviors among adult audiences in a variety show format. As part of the development of the series, over 200 doctors and health officials were surveyed to identify topics for a series of programs.<sup>90</sup> CTW staff then held various task force meetings, including sessions on family planning in March 1973, with invited figures from Planned Parenthood and associated organizations.

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<sup>89</sup> Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel Sabido, eds., *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 25.

<sup>90</sup> Les Brown, "A 'Sesame St.' for Adults On Health Care Tested," *The New York Times*, 12 November 1973.



These participants supported the idea of featuring family planning on the show, providing that the approach reflected the shift in their messaging efforts since the collapse of the overpopulation argument in the U.S. context. They had instead replaced this outdated issue with an emphasis on the personal benefits of planned families, as in the Advertising Council campaign.<sup>91</sup> While this satisfied the board members of the Council as well as network managers, media writers and producers complained that the new narratives lacked the urgency and emotional force of the population bomb argument. Jacqueline Babbin, a New York city-based producer, found the approach “boring,” and, along with CTW staff, pushed for a more dramatic storyline to reach viewers. When Ella McDonald, the director of a family planning program in New York City, commented that a pregnant eight-year-old had attended her clinic, the group agreed this was just the kind of situation that could work. Because of the very young age of the pregnant child, the example was less easy to dismiss than teenage pregnancy, which for some critics served as an important warning for young people to refrain from premarital sex and did not justify the need for abortion.<sup>92</sup>

Before any serious work was done developing the idea, anti-abortion campaigners began publicizing the shocking story that PBS television was planning to air an episode of *Sesame Street* in which a child would have an abortion. The confusion stemmed from a Planned Parenthood newsletter in which president Alan Guttmacher described the discussions he was involved in with CTW. Deliberately

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<sup>91</sup> “Task Force on Family Planning, Dinner Meeting, March 27,” unpaginated, Children’s Television Workshop Archives (hereafter CTW Archives), Hornbake Library, University of Maryland, Box 84, Folder 15.

<sup>92</sup> “Task Force on Family Planning, Morning Session, 28 March 1973,” unpaginated, CTW Archives), Hornbake Library, Box 84, Folder 15.

inflaming the controversy, religious leaders began circulating the misinformation among their congregants and calling for action. Ringleaders of the response employed a range of strategies. One San Francisco resident reported that the Catholic school attended by her two daughters had written to parents “demanding” that they send letters of complaint or lose their children’s place in the following year’s classes. “We have to have our children bring the letters to school, sealed and addressed and stamped, but they want to check off everyone’s name to make sure we did exactly as we were told, or rather blackmailed to do.”<sup>93</sup> This author sent her letter, but uncovered the ruse and expressed her support for Planned Parenthood within it. Thousands of angry letters flooded in to CTW.

Letter-writers drew on the rhetoric and imagery circulated in anti-abortion propaganda, which included graphic images of aborted fetuses as well as misrepresentations and fictional scenes of fetal experimentation. Feminist scholars have linked the use of such images to an escalation in the tactics of anti-abortionists and the displacement of women’s rights by the rights of the fetus.<sup>94</sup> As political scientist Rosalind Petchesky has asserted, “a picture of a dead fetus is worth a thousand words,” none of which attest to the plight of the prospective mother.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> [Author name redacted] to CTW, 4 October 1973, CTW Archives, Box 49 Folder 23.

<sup>94</sup> The National Abortion Federation documented 115 violent incidents at 46 clinics between 1977 and 1982. From 1983 to March 1985, the number had risen to 319 incidents involving 238 clinics, and by the end of 1985, 92 percent of abortion clinics reported harassment ranging from picketing to vandalism. Faye D. Ginsburg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 50.

<sup>95</sup> The classic essay on this subject is Rosalind Petchesky’s “Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of reproduction,” in *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine*, ed. Michelle Stanworth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). As Leslie Reagan has pointed out, the strategy had precedents. As early as 1910 a physician gave a lecture for women at a St. Louis settlement house that included an image, remarking “I think pictures like that of the six weeks’ embryo will keep many women from having an abortion done.” 85.

Scholars have also explored the introduction of endoscopy and ultrasound around this time and the impact of the unprecedented visualizations of fetal development they made possible. In 1965,

Abortion opponents exchanged pictures with one another and sent them to groups they protested against, including CBS during the *Maude* controversy.

As historian Johanna Schoen has shown, such images were used to recruit opponents. She quotes a demonstrator drawing on a depiction in the Wilkes' *Handbook* [figure 3] which claimed to show a physician in England experimenting on a live, aborted fetus suspended in a tank and attached to electrodes, who told another participant at a rally,

It's legal... to do experimentations on a live baby that's been taken out by abortion... like put electrodes on it. They've operated on babies, taken organs out when they're alive and they say: "Well, look we don't have to anesthetize them, they're not human."<sup>96</sup>

The images were circulated in pamphlets and magazines, on billboards, and on posters on picket lines outside abortion clinics. A pencil drawing of the Wilkes image

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*Life* magazine published a cover image by Lars Nilsson of a living fetus in the womb. Inside were a series of images at different gestational stages, ostensibly taken by the same process although one sentence within a page of text acknowledged that these embryos shown had in fact been "surgically removed." The status of these dead specimens was further elided by the presentation of images of later stages alongside dates printed in large type, which referred not to the large images of a more developed fetus but to smaller inset images from earlier stages. The effect suggested that the fetus took on a recognizably human form early in pregnancy, therefore implying its viability outside the womb long before it could actually survive. The photographer, Lars Nilsson, also published many of the same images in his 1966 book *A Child is Born: The Drama of Life Before Birth*, reissued in 1977 and 1990. Carole A. Stabile, "Shooting the Mother: Fetal Photography and the Politics of Disappearance," *Camera Obscura* 10 (1992); Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>96</sup> *Handbook on Abortion* (Cincinnati, OH: Hiltz Publishing Co., 1971), 119; Johanna Schoen, "A Matter for Scientific Study and Medical Judgment: Abortion providers, Anti-abortion Activists, and the Debate over Pregnancy Termination Procedures," (paper presented at Berkshire Women's History Conference, 2008), 26. Schoen demonstrates that resorting to graphic imagery accompanied a particularly aggressive phase of the anti-abortion movement which culminated in the murder of abortion providers and the bombing of clinics in the 1980s. Interestingly, she argues that they took a different visual approach in the 1990s, when they used line drawings of medical procedures and a photograph of a young girl whose arm had been severed in an attempted abortion. She suggests these more palatable images played a part in the success of the campaign against so-called "partial birth abortion" as they could be more widely circulated and referred to in court and congressional testimony.

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of supposed experimentation on a fetus also appeared in at least one of the letters to CTW [figure 4].<sup>97</sup>

Figure 3 [Not approved for electronic access]. Photograph of purported fetal experimentation. Credit: Jack Wilke and Barbara Wilke, *Handbook on Abortion*, 1971.

Figure 4 [Not approved for electronic access]. Hand-drawn depiction of fetal experimentation on a letter sent to the Children's Television Workshop, 8 October, 1973. Credit: Children's Television Workshop Archives, University of Maryland.

In response to the controversy, CTW staff met with anti-abortion groups and the topic of family planning was quietly dropped from the series. Although the producers stated that the change was not the result of opposition, anti-abortionists claimed the decision a victory for their efforts. The clash had a chilling effect on family planning broadcasting while emboldening the opposition. In 1984, former abortion provider Dr. Bernard Nathanson produced the film *The Silent Scream*, a narrated representation of an abortion viewed via ultrasound. Nathanson's graphic and emotionally-laden voiceover, which accompanied blurry images on the screen,

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<sup>97</sup> Children's Television Workshop Archives, Box 49, Folder 28.

described a fetus trying in vain to escape the abortionist's actions.<sup>98</sup> Journalists James Risen and Judy L. Thomas describe the film as "the anti-abortion movement's single most successful piece of propaganda and one of its most effective recruiting tools."<sup>99</sup>

Yet instead of developing visually compelling counterpoints to anti-abortion propaganda, the family planning movement took a different, more measured route, continually emphasizing the happiness available to educated individuals who could exercise their own choices. The *Silent Scream* narrative was laden with misrepresentations and inaccuracies, which Planned Parenthood attempted to expose and correct in their published response to the film, a pamphlet entitled *The Facts Speak Louder: Planned Parenthood's Critique of "The Silent Scream"* (1985).<sup>100</sup> While the written format of this publication no doubt allowed for a careful and detailed repudiation of the representations in the Nathanson film, it was undeniably less "affective." Contrary to their assertion, the facts could not speak louder than the "thousand words" of media images which continue to circulate in anti-abortion publicity.

## Conclusion

While it is hard to imagine how Planned Parenthood could have responded on an equally emotionally affecting level without reproducing pitiable images of poor families as Sanger had so controversially done in her 1917 film *Birth Control*, the decision to counter such a powerful visual piece with plain text and no images

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<sup>98</sup> Petchesky provides a detailed analysis of the distortions and representative strategies of the film in "Fetal Images."

<sup>99</sup> *Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 198.

<sup>100</sup> *Silent Scream II* (1987), against second trimester abortions, is beyond the scope of this analysis.

reflected wider trends with lasting consequences. The excesses of the population bomb era, which had proven wildly overplayed by the early 1970s, no doubt informed Planned Parenthood's more cautious response, as did internal divisions over the ethical use of media persuasion. The constraints lasted well beyond the most fervent years of anti-abortion activism. Two decades later, the president of the Population Reference Bureau, a clearinghouse for international family planning information and resources, acknowledged that the "debasement of photography" in anti-abortionists' use of images was one of the main reasons researchers working on family planning continued to shy away from visual materials.<sup>101</sup>

In the meantime, the visual strategies of the anti-abortion movement, largely uncontested in the mainstream media although feminist scholars critiqued them in detail, also crept into the health care industry under the imprimatur of the pregnancy loss or miscarriage movement. Another image from the Wilkes' publication, of an adult thumb and finger holding the feet of a fetus, focused on a recognizable body part described as "Tiny human feet at ten weeks, in the Uterus, perfectly formed," while obscuring the rest of the less developed body. Footprints based on this image appeared on hospital literature for women who had miscarried, and were worn as a pin on the lapels of health care staff.<sup>102</sup> While intended to convey empathy and possibly comfort grieving parents, the image, perhaps unknowingly, also implied an anti-abortion environment. The practice is likely to have silenced patients who wanted to discuss the possibility of terminating a pregnancy.

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<sup>101</sup> Peter J. Donaldson, "Using Photographs to Strengthen Family Planning Research," *International Family Planning Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2001): 150.

<sup>102</sup> Wilkes, *Handbook on Abortion*, 16. On the use of the image in the pregnancy loss movement, see Leslie Reagan, "From Hazard to Blessing to Tragedy: Representations of Miscarriage in Twentieth-Century America," *Feminist Studies*, 29, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 367.

As I have demonstrated here, even before the escalation of anti-abortion campaigning, members of Planned Parenthood clashed fiercely over the ethical use of the media to influence opinion. Those family planning advocates who denounced the application of persuasive media techniques were either unaware of the organization's long history of such work, or they did not associate previous efforts with the same goal. While they were unable to stop the trend, these dissenters were able to insist that the messaging be modified. Between these internal pressures, the concerns of the Advertising Council, and the requirements of the networks, the Information and Education Department (founded to integrate health communications theory into the work of Planned Parenthood) was forced to compromise its approach to media messaging. Emotive appeals, graphic imagery, references to sexuality, and humor were all sacrificed, regardless of their value for persuasive communication.

The expanding use of the mass media by family planning promoters reinforced the "mainstreaming" of their message due to the limits of public discourse on sex and reproduction. When Planned Parenthood launched its first nationwide advertising campaign in 1972, "the messages were so bland they probably could have passed Anthony Comstock," according to J. Mayone Stycos, founder and director of the International Population Program at Cornell University.<sup>103</sup> In order to pursue more controversial activities, Martha Stuart left the organization and founded her own company. In doing so, she aligned herself with a broadening community of feminists asserting their own goals for reproductive health independently of Planned Parenthood's plan of action.

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<sup>103</sup> Stycos, "Desexing Birth Control," *Family Planning Perspectives* 9 (1977): 290.

Bemoaning the “desexing” of family planning Stycos suggested that by the time the United States government got involved in international campaigns in the 1960s, the subject of the next chapter, sexuality had been completely eradicated from the movement and its media. While family planning promoters had always been subject to broadcasting conventions that shaped what they could advertise, and how, it is clear that in the era of the sexual revolution, Planned Parenthood took a particularly timid approach. The process began earlier and was even more pronounced in the activities of the members of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

## **Chapter 4: “Most of the World’s People Need Planned Parenthood”<sup>1</sup>**

Here I return to the postwar period of the previous chapter, this time focusing on the international activities of American family planning promoters, who had worked with like-minded colleagues in other countries for decades but now dramatically expanded their activities beyond the borders of the United States.<sup>2</sup> Under the threat of a global “population explosion” the interests of the American family planning movement began to coalesce with the government’s foreign policy concerns. As a result, they were permitted to promote their cause through federal channels. The government not only opened its airwaves to the issue but also got into the business itself, providing funding to family planning promoters explicitly for the development of media. Their motivation, the overpopulation issue, heavily influenced their

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<sup>1</sup> “Birth Control is a Godsend,” PPFA I, Box 100, Folder 8, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Beryl Suitters, *Be Brave and Angry: Chronicles of the IPPF* (London: IPPF, 1973), chaps. 1-3.



message, which focused on the economic benefits of fewer children both for countries and for individual families.

Although governments and family planning advocates in some European countries had already successfully launched programs, campaigners in other nations around the world had struggled for decades to get the issue on their governments' agendas. The mid-century global food crisis proved a turning point, however, convincing formerly reluctant leaders in impoverished nations in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (the regions I focus on here), that unchecked population growth threatened national and global stability. Like-minded groups from around the world worked together to organize conferences and committees to cultivate support for family planning, culminating in the launch of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1952.<sup>3</sup>

The United States government initially relied heavily on the family planning movement for its media activities. In 1952 the State Department began broadcasting Planned Parenthood worldwide over its own radio network, Voice of America. The programs publicized the problem of overpopulation, often using the same materials first heard on domestic radio, as in 1953 when a speech first given by Sanger in Sweden was aired on the CBS series "This I Believe," and then rebroadcast on Voice of America.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In 1946, attendees to the annual conference of Sweden's National League for Sex Education formed an international committee which was formalized in 1949 as the International Committee for Planned Parenthood (ICPP). In 1951, in recognition of the remarkable progress of family planning efforts there, Margaret Sanger asked Indian family planning advocates if they would host the next international conference of the ICPP. The following year, the ICPP was replaced by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), led by Indian birth control proponent Lady Rama Rau and Margaret Sanger.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 435.

American family planning promoters were soon offered unprecedented levels of funding for their international work. In November 1961, President John F. Kennedy established the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to administer non-military foreign assistance, and within a few years family planning had been added to the list of programs the organization could support. Between 1965 and 1968, USAID's contributions to family planning programs increased substantially, from \$2.1 million to \$34.7 million.<sup>5</sup> By 1973 USAID's budget for family planning had risen to \$125 million.<sup>6</sup> The United States also played a major role in the formation of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), which was established in 1969 to promote family planning in low-income countries.<sup>7</sup> By then, the American government was the main source of funding for family planning programs worldwide.<sup>8</sup> This meant that organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the Population Council no longer had to rely exclusively on their own fundraising, but could depend on public funding to support aspects of their work.

Once again, the mass media was central to the effort to disseminate the family planning message. The vast amounts of money devoted to international family planning paid for a proliferation of media on the topic. Communications specialists working with USAID, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), and groups such as the Population Council, began with the "diffusion of innovations model," the single-most influential communications strategy of this period. Indeed,

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<sup>5</sup> R. T. Ravenholt, "The A.I.D. Population and Family Planning Program—Goals, Scope, and Progress," *Demography* 5 (1968): 561.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Moss, *The Population Council: A Chronicle of the First twenty-Five Years, 1952-1977* (New York: The Population Council, 1978), 78.

<sup>7</sup> The organization was renamed the United Nations Population Fund in 1987 but retains the original acronym of UNFPA.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Tilson Piotrow, *World Population Crisis: The United States Response* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), x.

even into the twenty-first century, international family planning was still being cited by communications specialists as “[o]ne of the best examples of the validity of the theory of ‘diffusion of innovations.’”<sup>9</sup>

The approach, relying on innovators in a target community to support and adopt family planning early on, thereby encouraging others to do the same, had been used with great success in the United States. After 1960 communications researchers in low-income countries used the strategy to introduce a wide range of practices, from the new agricultural technologies and techniques of the Green Revolution to public health campaigns for malaria prevention and improved nutrition. By 1964 they were applying these methods to the dissemination of information about family planning.<sup>10</sup>

Effective, low-cost contraceptive technologies such as the IUD (intra-uterine device) and the pill had been developed to make family planning widely accessible. Cheap media tools such as posters, cartoon booklets, and radio broadcasts were used to recruit field workers to travel the countryside delivering information and contraceptives, and inform villagers far and wide of the breakthrough technologies now available. The expansion of available funding also financed the extensive use of film, considered the leading technology of postwar international communications. Projectors and makeshift screens brought family planning messages to even the most remote communities, with mobile film units used in Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Pakistan, Thailand and across Latin America [figure 5].<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Elaine Murphy, “Diffusion of Innovations: Family Planning in Developing Countries,” *Journal of Health Communication* 9 (2004): 123.

<sup>10</sup> The first major field experiment of diffusion for family planning was undertaken in Taiwan by Bernard Berelson and Ronald Freedman, “A Study in Fertility Control,” *Scientific American*, 210 (1964).

<sup>11</sup> “Family Planning Programs,” *Population Reports J*, no. 23 (Jan-Feb 1981): 495.

Beyond the capacity to rapidly reach large groups of people, mass media had an additional, symbolic, function. As J. Mayone Stycos, founder and director of the International Population Program at Cornell University, noted in 1977, “in many countries, tabus against publicity about contraceptives are more potent than laws against the sale or distribution of contraceptives themselves [original emphasis].”<sup>12</sup> Overcoming the prohibition against the public display and discussion of contraception was the first step in legitimizing birth control as a practice, as advocates in the United States had realized early in the twentieth century. This had been a key strategy of the fledgling domestic movement, and although communications experts did not explicitly cite these origins as their inspiration they could draw on decades of examples.

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<sup>12</sup> J. Mayone Stycos, *The Great Tabu: A Half Century of Population and Family Planning Communication* (Hawaii: East-West Communication Institute, 1977), 4.



Figure 5. A mobile film unit presentation to a rural community in Morocco, n.d.

Credit: WHO/UNESCO/G. Bohm

With contraceptive use legalized in countries launching national family planning campaigns, advocates hoped to extend this phenomenon beyond simply legitimizing the subject to also remove any stigma and normalize its use. Bernard Berelson of the Population Council confidently exclaimed that “the very massiveness of the mass media can promote this image of social acceptability.”<sup>13</sup> He believed that in addition to demystifying the subject, broadcasting family planning created the impression that it was widely accepted and that “everybody is doing it.”<sup>14</sup> At first

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<sup>13</sup> “On Family Planning Communication,” *Demography* 1 (1964): 94-105, 102.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Wilder, “Getting More out of the Mass Media: A Modern Guide for Modern Family Planning Programmes,” 1969, IPPF Roll 0433, p. 9. At this time Wilder worked at the Ford Foundation and served as a mass media consultant for the Indian family planning campaign.

then, international family planning campaigns (like their domestic counterparts) were characterized by great faith in the power of media. However, as I described in chapter three, in the United States the early optimism of family planning promoters was gradually replaced by a more limited sense of its impact in the mid-twentieth century. Those lessons were even more apparent internationally as Americans tried to transfer home-grown communications strategies abroad.

Berelson recognized that the subject was a difficult one to talk about in many cultures: local people might resist someone else (either from their own government or another country) telling them what was the best size for their family. Still, he believed that the lack of media competition in target nations in the developing world, and the originality of the message, would prove highly persuasive. As he saw it, “anything you say is attractive just by virtue of the fact that it is novel.”<sup>15</sup> The first campaigns appeared to prove him right, creating high levels of awareness of the availability of birth control. Beginning in the 1950s, surveys in India and other developing countries also showed that attitudes towards its use were overwhelmingly positive. But for any long-term impact, it was not enough to simply promote the availability of contraception, as family planning promoters would gradually discover. They would eventually move beyond informing audiences of the availability of services to experiment with more persuasive techniques to motivate their use.

Over the course of the next two decades, beginning in the late 1960s, these efforts came under attack from both left and right-wing groups. In addition to clashes within the countries they targeted, family planning promoters faced criticism at home as feminist as well as conservative groups challenged the goals and practices of

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<sup>15</sup> “On Family Planning Communication,” *Demography* 1 (1964): 102.

international “population control.” The same critique of the morals of media *persuasion* (as opposed to information) that had arisen at home became central to efforts to overhaul family planning communications in the 1970s and ‘80s. As the population control community reconsidered the ethical and practical implications of a top-down model of delivery of services, health communications experts involved in family planning promotion also re-conceptualized their activities. The results included a move away from movies towards a more grassroots model based on indigenous media, such as puppet shows, dramatic performances, and songs; a new emphasis on female empowerment and community participation; and a diversification of media messages to better reflect the changing rationale and rhetoric of international family planning.

### **From Population Control to Female Empowerment**

The motivations for international family planning campaigning, like those propelling the domestic movement in the United States in the same period, diverged along two major strands: feminist and demographic. Although they may have had similar goals, these groups differed in their approach. Because feminists were more likely to prioritize women’s access to contraception than the general goal of increased contraceptive use that focused the efforts of the overpopulation crowd, they were more attuned to the role of poverty, gender hierarchies, and lack of education in limiting reproductive use. “Population controllers,” however, tended to see contraception as a simple solution to such economic and social problems. They were less invested in the broader agenda of social change advocated by the international

women's movement, as their impetus stemmed from fears of overpopulation and Cold War anxieties that the allegiance of poor countries could be bought by Communist nations. Connecting poverty to population, in the 1950s American demographers argued that the economic development of vulnerable countries was stifled by their rates of population growth. One of the most influential studies, which focused on India, suggested that low-cost family planning programs to lower fertility would yield significant increases in per capita wealth.<sup>16</sup> Smaller families meant fewer dependents, giving families more disposable income and lessening a state's burden for services such as schooling, housing, and healthcare.<sup>17</sup> From the outset, then, philanthropic and federal investment in the promotion of international family planning was framed in economic terms. This emphasis overlapped with some of the rhetoric of the birth control movement in the United States and its allies in other countries, but excluded any feminist rationale for helping men and women to plan their families.

The agenda of population control had a significant impact on the ways in which family planning was rolled out around the world. Even the development of contraceptive technologies, for example, was directly affected by the neglect of a woman-centered approach, with research funding awarded to long-lasting techniques such as the Depo-Provera injection rather than a wider exploration of low-technology options with fewer side effects.<sup>18</sup> The preference for high-technology solutions was

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<sup>16</sup> Ansley Coale and Edgar M. Hoover, *Population Growth and Income Development in Low Income Countries: A Case Study of India's Prospects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

<sup>17</sup> Phyllis Tilson Piotrow, *World Population Crisis: The United States Response* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Of course the development of the pill, pushed for by Margaret Sanger and financed by her friend, Katherine McCormick, medicalized birth control and reflected Sanger's emphasis on allying with the medical profession. Requiring medical prescription and supervision ensured the technology could only be administered through the care of a physician. On the low status of contraceptive research and researchers' attempts to legitimize their work by focusing on high technology scientific solutions, see



also widespread among family planning providers who assumed that women in these countries couldn't be relied upon to use contraceptives consistently. Long-lasting injections, or intrauterine devices, required less regular "patient compliance" than other methods, such as the pill, condoms, or foam, for example. Target groups were thus frequently offered only a limited range of contraceptive options (if they were given any choice at all) in a model focused on increasing the numbers of contraceptive users rather than expanding the range of reproductive health services available.

In his scathing critique of international population control, historian Matthew Connelly diminishes the idea of varying motivations within the community of family planning promoters, and emphasizes their supposedly mercenary, rather than humanitarian, goals.<sup>19</sup> Yet the evidence does not support a wholly damning interpretation. Over the course of several decades, feminist groups and others concerned with the ethical dimensions of population control steered the movement away from a narrow economic agenda towards a rights-based approach. Many did so while working with, or within, those same organizations involved in international family planning, such as Martha Stuart and members of the IPPF as well as their media partners.

The transformation from "population control" to "reproductive rights" was formalized at successive United Nations' meetings of governments and non-

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Adele E. Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and the "Problem of Sex"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). The unequal attention to low-technology solutions has continued in the age of AIDS with the meager funding awarded to microbicide research in favor of the sums that have gone instead to the unsuccessful search for a vaccine against HIV.

<sup>19</sup> Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). As I stated in the introduction to this study, I disagree with Connelly's wholeheartedly negative assessment of the family planning projects undertaken during the population control era.

governmental groups organized to establish a global consensus on approach. At the first World Population Conference held in Bucharest in 1974, developing nations challenged the global economic policies supported by wealthier nations and argued that international population assistance was a racist and imperialist project promoted to limit the need for foreign aid. By the second meeting in Mexico, ten years later, many of these critics had come to view rapid population growth as a pressing issue affecting maternal and infant mortality and compounding the health and social problems created by urbanization. Although some remained critical of the world economic order, they began to focus on family planning as an urgent, and achievable, priority.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, by this time, the United States government, under the leadership of President Ronald Reagan, was bowing to conservative pressure at home to scale back its funding for international family planning as the New Right rose in influence in American politics.

In response to the rise of Second Wave and Third World feminist influence, the United Nations adopted new initiatives declaring 1975 International Women's Year and 1976-1985 United Nations Decade for Women. In 1977 they established the annual International Women's Day.<sup>21</sup> The transformation of attitudes and approach signaled by these events became evident in the changing media strategies of family

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<sup>20</sup> Jason L. Finkle and C. Alison McIntosh, "Ideology and Politics at Mexico City: The United States at the 1984 International Conference on Population," *Population and Development Review* 11 (March 1985). The reframing of the family planning agenda which resulted is evident in the increasingly feminist rhetoric adopted at these international meetings, beginning with the emphasis on a couples' right to choose the number and timing of their children at the Teheran Conference on Human Rights in 1968. At the Bucharest conference in 1974, the phrase "couples and individuals" was adopted instead, and was again upheld at the second meeting in Mexico in 1984. By 1994, a decade beyond the scope of this study, the trend well underway in the 1970s had reached its pinnacle with the language of "women's rights" asserted at the Cairo meeting, despite the objections of the Holy See and many Islamic countries. C. Alison McIntosh and Jason L. Finkle, "The Cairo Conference on Population and Development: A New Paradigm?" *Population and Development Review* 21, no. 2 (1995), n. 6.

<sup>21</sup> For a full account of these developments see Hilikka Pietilä, *The Unfinished Story of Women and the United Nations* (New York and Geneva: United Nations, 2007).

planning promoters. In the early years, when the dominant language of international population control explicitly emphasized the financial responsibilities of parenting (often to the exclusion of any other issue), media products rarely strayed from this rhetoric. The economic argument shaped family planning media in the heyday of its use in the 1960s until the International Planned Parenthood Federation and others began to argue for an approach that would instead honor the newly articulated goals of female empowerment and community participation.

### **Launching International Family Planning: India Leads the Way**

India had become something of a poster nation for the idea of the ticking population bomb ever since 1968, when Paul Ehrlich described his experiences in Delhi as the catalyst for his commitment to population control.

As we crawled through the city, we entered a crowded slum area. The temperature was well over 100, and the air was a haze of dust and smoke. The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people. As we moved slowly through the mob, hand horn squawking, the dust, noise, heat, and cooking fires gave the scene a hellish aspect. Would we ever get to our hotel? All three of us were, frankly, frightened. . . . Since that night I've known the feel of overpopulation."<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the country had a long history of efforts to establish family planning. One of the world's first government-operated birth control clinics was founded in Mysore State in 1930, and five years later family planning became an official national policy. However, contraception remained inaccessible to the majority of poor women for

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<sup>22</sup> *The Population Bomb*, quoted in Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 216.

years. The Indian birth control movement faced hostile Catholic and Gandhian opposition, and risked political reprisals for merely promoting the idea. Instead, in the 1920s and thirties they invited foreign advocates, including Margaret Sanger, to visit the country and speak out strongly in favor of contraception. A key opposition argument within India was the notion that Indian women would become “Westernized” and reject their traditional roles if they had access to contraception. As a result, a fellow speaker advised Sanger in 1924 “not to stress the woman freedom viewpoint until you have a foothold,” and visitors were careful to frame their remarks within the context of maternal and child health instead.<sup>23</sup>

Sanger had brought some media and other educational materials with her to teach the basic techniques of contraception to health professionals but she and her Indian colleagues steered clear of any mass media campaigning, although her visit did generate newspaper publicity.<sup>24</sup> They eschewed more direct use of broadcast media until the idea of birth control was well accepted by the country’s elites, rather than employing it to build widespread support as they had done in the United States.<sup>25</sup> At such an early stage, mass media would be of little use, if blatant publicity that might arouse opposition could be linked to outside groups.

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<sup>23</sup> Agnes Smedley to Margaret Sanger, quoted in Schoen, *Choice and Coercion*, 225.

<sup>24</sup> Sanger showed physicians a film designed for healthcare professionals, *The Biology of Conception and Mechanism of Contraception* (1922), produced by the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in New York. She also provided fifty “gynaepaque” models of pelvic organs, which Indian physicians found very helpful in conveying the use of birth control to illiterate village women. Barbara Ramusack, “Authority and Ambivalence: Medical Women and Birth Control in India,” in *Reproductive Health in India: History, Politics, Controversies*, ed. Sarah Hodges (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 2006), 20.

<sup>25</sup> In the late 1940s the Ministry of Information worked with the Family Planning Association of India on a documentary film promoting the limitation of family size, called *Planned Parenthood*, described in a history of the IPPF as “the first experiment in the use of this medium” in India. Suitters, *Be Brave and Angry*, 47. I have yet to locate further information on this production, but there is no evidence that it marked the beginning of a sustained major media campaign. See also Vera Houghton, “Planned Parenthood in India,” *Obstetrical and Gynecological Survey* 7, no. 2 (1952).

In the years following Indian independence in 1947, the country's leaders sought to establish national family planning services as a means to speed economic growth and development, but health officials hostile to birth control hired few physicians for women's health programs and failed to implement any extensive program, despite the availability of government funding. By the 1950s, confident in the government's support, family planning promoters were taking a more active role to galvanize support. As the IPPF described, they could campaign both behind the scenes and more publicly in developing nations during such a crucial stage:

The IPPF can play its most important and unique role by persuading the intelligentsia of the need for governmental concern, and by creating a climate of public opinion which will convince the politicians that governmental action meets a popular demand.<sup>26</sup>

To document public enthusiasm and the feasibility of family planning campaigns in various countries, advocates developed KAP, or "knowledge, attitude and practice" surveys.<sup>27</sup> Family planning promoters launched their first large-scale study of attitudes outside the United States in 1951. They anticipated a receptive climate given the long history of birth control advocacy within India, and found the results encouraging. Potential users expressed support for family planning and requested information and resources. Between 1965 and 1977 at least 500 such studies were done, with over 240 undertaken in India alone.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Colville Deverell, "The International Planned Parenthood Federation—Its Role in Developing Countries," *Demography* 5, no. 2 (1968): 574.

<sup>27</sup> This seems to be the most common name, although the same surveys are also described in some of the literature as AUK studies, for Attitude, Use, and Knowledge. See, for example, J. Mayone Stycos, "Survey Research and Population Control in Latin America," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1964): 367.

<sup>28</sup> R. P. Worrall, "Family and Population Planning Communication: Ten Years of Experience," in *IEC Strategies: Their Role in Promoting Behavior Change in Family and Population Planning* (Hawaii: East-West Communication Institute, July 1977), cited in Everett M. Rogers, Douglas Solomon, and

KAP research served multiple goals. In the first place, a survey of public opinion could formally record the numbers of people supportive of or personally interested in birth control. In this way, researchers secured the data to back up the movement's long-held claims that people the world over wanted to control their fertility. Although many survey participants undoubtedly did hold the positive views they expressed, it is also likely that some may have felt obliged to give their interviewer a favorable answer, given that interviewees who anticipate that a particular answer or outcome is preferred are liable to aim to please their questioner. Such answers "relieved the apprehensions of family planning programmers" by confirming a pre-existing desire for family planning, but they may have obscured ambivalence on the part of some interviewees or glossed over their difficulties in reconciling personal views with the conflicting values of their spouses, families, or communities.<sup>29</sup>

Another benefit of the survey approach was that it provided a "relatively uncontroversial" means to initiate family planning activity when opposition prevented more direct activity such as the provision of clinic services.<sup>30</sup> The results could then be disseminated among policy makers to allay their fears that the general public might prove hostile to the subject. Presumably, a secondary benefit was also the opportunity to inform participants of the existence of various reliable forms of contraception. By introducing them to the groups working to establish such services the survey process could thus help to recruit people to the practice, as well as the

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Ronny Adhikarya, *Further Directions for USAID's Communication Policies in Population* (Stanford: Institute for Communication Research, 1978), 205.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers et al, *Further Directions for USAID's Communication Policies in Population*, 206.

<sup>30</sup> Stycos, "Survey Research and Population Control in Latin America," 368.

cause of family planning. All of this could be accomplished discreetly on a local level, through interaction between researchers and their target population, without drawing the kind of attention a massive media campaign would generate.

Within a year of the initial survey, India became the first of the developing nations to launch a nationwide population control program. After decades of efforts by Indian advocates and the support of their international colleagues, the widely publicized and hotly debated overpopulation argument had finally convinced many elite opponents that unchecked population growth was harmful to India's future, but public health officers spent only half of the funds allocated, establishing 147 new clinics by the end of 1956, just twenty-one of which were in rural areas where the majority of the population resided.<sup>31</sup>

It was not until the 1961 population census demonstrated that the clinic system was not attracting enough participants to slow the rate of growth that the government began systematically to use the media to publicize services and promote the benefits of smaller families. By then numerous other nations had launched their own programs. A common early feature was the development of a logo, which could be displayed on buses and trains, in shop windows and government buildings, on billboards and posters on the street, in community buildings and around healthcare facilities, saturating public space with family planning messaging without the expense of a major media campaign.

While many countries, including Kenya, Pakistan, Singapore, Jamaica, and Korea tried to imbue their logos with meaning by depicting a normative family size of two adults and two children, communications specialists advocated a less didactic

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<sup>31</sup> Schoen, *Choice and Coercion*, 216-234.

approach. Wilbur Schramm, pioneer of the field in the United States, praised India for choosing an inverted red triangle, a symbol with no prior meaning, which had no imagery or text that could be misinterpreted, and which could be easily reproduced by non-artists. The image quickly became synonymous with family planning as it could be found wherever services were available or family planning promoters were discussing the topic.

At first, traditional means were used to disseminate the message. Elephants had long been used for promotional purposes, for example, and the red triangle was displayed along with campaign slogans on a cloth hung over an animal which traveled with promoters from village to village.<sup>32</sup> However, such techniques could hardly saturate the culture with the message that family planning was safe, effective, and available. Nor were the most affordable communication tools, such as word of mouth and leafleting, sufficient to quickly reach the large, rural groups family planning promoters had in their sights. At the same time, pamphlets, like press coverage, were of little use among these populations because of their high rates of illiteracy. These challenges prompted the government and family planning promoters to add more expensive media to the promotional toolbox.

As the international population control movement took off elsewhere, India's national effort was re-launched, with three billion rupees (equivalent to 400 million US dollars at the time) allocated for the five-year period between 1969 and 1974. Of that, 19 million dollars was set aside solely for mass communication. By 1971, some 600 family planning programs were broadcast on the radio every month and a

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<sup>32</sup> For a fuller discussion of logo design see Frank Wilder, "Getting More out of the Mass Media: A Modern Guide for Modern Family Planning Programmes," unpublished paper, 1969, p. 9 and Wilbur Schramm, "Communication in Family Planning." *Reports on Population/Family Planning* 7 (1971).



newsreel was produced weekly. Annually over the next few years, eight to ten films were released, approximately 5000 film showings and 5000 public meetings were organized, and about 20,000 song and drama troupes gave performances on the subject of family planning.<sup>33</sup>

The postwar period saw an exponential increase in family planning activities across many countries, rolled out in two phases.<sup>34</sup> The first became known among family planning promoters as the “Clinic Era” because of an emphasis on the provision of services, modeled on Planned Parenthood’s clinic-based approach in the United States. Kenya, for example, the first country south of the Sahara to join the IPPF (in 1965) established free services and within eight years was recruiting 2500 new contraceptive users a month. In the first four years of Iran’s program, 1200 clinics, mostly offering free services, were launched. This medically-oriented strategy depended on a robust network of healthcare services countrywide and locals’ willingness to meet with medical staff to gain access to contraception.

The communications strategy in this period was strictly informational, based on the assumption that publicity about the availability of services would be sufficient to encourage people to take advantage of them. Local circumstances undermined the transferability of the clinic system in many countries, however, due to a shortage of medical personnel and health facilities (especially in rural areas), an emphasis in any existing clinics on dealing with more immediate child and maternal health problems,

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<sup>33</sup> Schramm, “Communication in Family Planning,” 19.

<sup>34</sup> Numerous studies give country-by-country comparisons, and Schramm’s “Communication in Family Planning” includes extensive discussion of media strategies.

and male control over the fertility decisions of their wives.<sup>35</sup> In Kenya, for example, mass publicity was postponed so that training of health care providers could be undertaken to serve the anticipated demand before widely advertising the availability of services.

Mass media became much more significant in the second phase, which family planning promoters in the 1960s described as the “Field Era.” Extensive use of the mass media was coupled with face-to-face outreach to bring the message to community members and provide opportunities for questions and discussion. Massive networks of paraprofessionals were trained to serve their local communities, as in Taiwan and Korea, where thousands of field workers visited villages even in the most remote locations. Family planning media was used to recruit both workers and their target audience of potential contraceptive users. Publicity promoted the idea of family planning, while field workers explained the techniques and recruited participants at their homes and workplaces. Providers also set up services in convenient locations, such as the vasectomy clinics established in railway stations in Bombay (now Mumbai) in the mid-1960s, and targeted couples at opportune times such as following the birth of a child.<sup>36</sup> Family planning promoters didn’t expect media to work alone then, but considered it a crucial element of this two-stage approach combining advertising and interpersonal communication.

Mass media strategies drew on existing broadcasting infrastructure and introduced new means to reach disparate audiences. Television broadcasting, which surmounted the literacy barrier, was impractical in poor countries because of the lack

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<sup>35</sup> Everett M. Rogers, *Communication Strategies for Family Planning* (The Free Press, New York: 1973), 84-87.

<sup>36</sup> Rogers, *Communication Strategies for Family Planning*, 88-92.

of mass communication networks. Radio was more widely available [figure 6], with an estimated 110 million sets in the developing world by the end of the 1960s.<sup>37</sup>



Figure 6. Members of the Baziri tribe listen to the radio. Somalia, 1963.

Credit: WHO/Eric Schwab

The medium quickly became the cornerstone of family planning media. During one week alone in 1967, Pakistan radio broadcast a talk by a doctor, a discussion, an interview program, a symposium, a “feature,” specially produced songs, an interview with village workers, an interview with a couple using birth control, another discussion, and a ballad called “Punthi Path,” all on the topic of

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<sup>37</sup> Anthony and Elizabeth Isaacs, “The Use of Traditional Art Forms in Association with Mass Media for Social Development Programmes (With Special Reference to Family Planning Programs),” (Prepared for the UNESCO/IPPF Expert Group Meeting on the Integrated Use of Folk Media and Mass Media in Family Planning Communications, November 1972), 12.

family planning.<sup>38</sup> As family planning promoters sought to increase the appeal of their messages, however, they began to experiment with film as a means to better capture the attention of audiences.

### **The “KAP-gap”<sup>39</sup>**

Indeed, informing people of the availability of birth control, and motivating them to use it, had proven to be two very different things. Despite initial success in recruiting couples to family planning programs with a combination of media campaigns and outreach by community workers and clinic staff, by the end of the 1960s participation rates were in decline around the world, and the number of users had begun to plateau. Adoption of contraceptive use stopped rising, and discontinuance rates were high.

Those studying the phenomenon blamed a variety of factors, including social pressures for girls to marry and bear children young as well as the failures of family planning technologies, from rumors of side-effects to bad experiences with particular methods. Yet even where support for family planning was high, researchers found low rates of use and high probabilities of discontinuance.<sup>40</sup> KAP studies were inadequate to explain the gap between positive attitudes towards contraception and low usage, providing only the data for measuring the rate of decline.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Wilbur Schramm, *Communication in Family Planning* (New York: Population Council, 1971), 7.

<sup>39</sup> Rogers et al, *Further Directions for USAID's Communication Policies in Population*, 206.

<sup>40</sup> This widely acknowledged phenomenon was described as the “paradox” of research findings, “that there is widespread desire for small families, while... the actual volume of clinic visits does not reflect that desire.” Wilder, “Getting More out of the Mass Media,” 11.

<sup>41</sup> Rogers et al, *Further Directions for USAID's Communication Policies in Population*, 206; Julian L. Simon, “A Huge Marketing Research Task: Birth Control,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 5, no. 1 (1968): 23.

Some of the leading figures in family planning communications began to express their doubts about the usefulness of existing media methods in this period and about the strategies of program leaders. Critics singled out administrators who enthusiastically undertook their own artistic endeavors but refused to incorporate “scientific” communication principles. While the finished product might look good, it proved uninspiring to target audiences. This might be discovered during a pre-testing phase, if only people bothered to undertake one. Furthermore, as Frank Wilder, Ford Foundation’s consultant to India on mass media for family planning bemoaned, administrators often sacrificed persuasive film scripts to instead describe in clinical detail a particular contraceptive method. While physicians might be pleased with the result, it would be lost on lay audiences who might even be discouraged by “overdosing” on clinical description.<sup>42</sup> Such mistakes stemmed from a failure to clearly define the target audience, an issue that cropped up frequently thanks to family planning promoters’ desire to repurpose expensive materials for different groups.

Critics also began to question the wisdom of transferring an agricultural model—the theory of the diffusion of innovations—into the field of family planning, and the over-reliance on health education strategies drawn from medicine instead of market research or advertising.<sup>43</sup> Family planning, they argued, could not be promoted like other technological innovations or public health initiatives. While improved farming methods or malaria prevention activities could prove their benefits relatively quickly, the gains of smaller family sizes might not be obvious for a

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<sup>42</sup> Wilder, “Getting More out of the Mass Media,” 2.

<sup>43</sup> Stycos, *The Great Tabu*, 18-19.

number of years. Adopting new practices to fend off hunger and disease was also likely to be more obviously appealing than adopting family planning, which meant going against tradition, social values, or one or both partners' personal inclinations. Yet given the huge successes of consumer advertising, communications experts remained reluctant to give up on the potential of the media. The key, some argued, was to devise a strategy specific to family planning.

As KAP studies included little information about the cause of the problem, some began to study media more closely, reworking KAP studies into KAMP studies, where the M stood for "media," to evaluate more precisely a target audience's exposure and response to family planning messaging.<sup>44</sup> Communications theorists looked to American advertisers to learn from their remarkable successes in building and sustaining consumer culture. "Social marketing," one of the more influential communications theories proposed as a result, was based on an advertising model and shifted away from delivering information towards the inculcation of motivation, attempting to "sell" positive social change just like soap.<sup>45</sup>

Techniques developed to convince the American public to buy would have to be modified for other audiences, of course. In the United States, "television alone could sell a new product to millions who never used it before, in the space of mere weeks," but in countries marked by high illiteracy and so-called "adherence to tradition and primitive communications," the usual avenues were unavailable,

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<sup>44</sup> David Radel, "Communications Research and Communicating Research: The Population Field Encounters Old Problems and Attempts New Solutions," (paper presented at "Major Issues in World Communication," East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, 2-4 January 1972), 5.

<sup>45</sup> Communications scholar Gerhard D. Wiebe is considered the founding father of social marketing (meaning socially-beneficial marketing) for his consideration of the means to "sell brotherhood" in the same manner as soap. "Merchandising Commodities and Citizenship on Television," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 15 (1952), 1.

unworkable, or inappropriate.<sup>46</sup> Solving the technical limitations was only half the battle. The failure of information campaigns to promote long-term contraceptive use suggested another strategy was needed. Towards the end of the 1960s, family planning promoters set out on a new approach, concentrating on using the mass media to *motivate* audiences to use family planning, rather than simply *informing* them of its benefits.<sup>47</sup>

The communications specialists working in this field began to place greater emphasis on the dramatic, emotional, or motivational value of media. The exemplar of the new approach was an animated cartoon called *Family Planning*, produced by the Population Council and Walt Disney Studios in 1967. The venture was by far the most expensive family planning film of the time by far, costing \$300,000 to produce, but the investment paid off: *Family Planning* was later described by the IPPF as “the most effective of all the Motivational films” of its time.<sup>48</sup>

This was not the first time Disney had produced a message film. In 1940 President Roosevelt established the Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics (renamed the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs in 1941) to promote his Good Neighbor initiative. The OCIAA mobilized press, radio, and film to “carry a message of democracy and friendship below the Rio Grande.” Walt Disney was one of the first Hollywood producers to participate, developing “direct propaganda films couched in the simplicity of animation,” many of which featured the studio’s beloved characters,

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<sup>46</sup> Wilder, “Getting More out of the Mass Media,” 14.

<sup>47</sup> Everett Rogers named this simply “The Contemporary Era” in his 1973 book, *Communication Strategies for Family Planning*.

<sup>48</sup> Untitled International Planned Parenthood Federation document, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 6, Folder “IPPF Bogota Tapes.”

including Donald Duck.<sup>49</sup> Historians Lisa Cartwright and Brian Goldfarb have focused on fifteen Disney films from the 1940s that address health topics, arguing that like other narratives of global exchange from this period, they reveal a fear of contagion from interaction with foreign cultures.<sup>50</sup> Cartwright and Goldfarb also suggest that the use of animation, a technique directed at children within the United States, reflected paternalistic attitudes to Latin Americans based on assumptions about their more “primitive” lifestyles. No doubt such attitudes were prevalent among many involved in this program of cultural exchange. But animation had also been used at home in a wide array of health films for adult audiences, adding a humorous and entertaining element to such serious subjects as venereal disease.

*Family Planning* features Donald Duck at an artist’s easel, painting images of families from around the world and various birth control devices, while a narrator describes the benefits of limiting family size [figure 7].

Figure 7 [Not approved for electronic access]. Donald Duck illustrates overpopulation. Credit: *Family Planning*, 1969.

Early on, images of peoples of different cultures are merged into one everyman as the narrator explains that the story is relevant to all of us in the world’s “family of man.”

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<sup>49</sup> The colonial perspective evident in two of these films, *Saludos Amigos* (1943) and *The Three Caballeros* (1945), is discussed by Julianne Burton-Carvajal, “‘Surprise Package’: Looking Southward with Disney,” and José Piedra, “Pato Donald’s Gender Ducking,” in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994). Quotes cited in Carvajal, 133.

<sup>50</sup> See Lisa Cartwright and Brian Goldfarb, “Cultural Contagion: On Disney’s Health Education Films for Latin America,” in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin, 172.



As film historian Robert Eberwein notes in his brief discussion of the film, the result is a curious hybrid of cultural symbols, creating perhaps one unrecognizable man rather than a universally identifiable everyman. Although Eberwein condemns the way in which the film “offers its presumably white audience evidence about the value of birth control while confirming stereotypical fears about the Other,” it appears that this costly production was actually intended for a large and diverse international audience.<sup>51</sup> In fact, the “family of man” approach was a deliberate strategy, using the benefits of cartoon animation to transcend a specific location, race, or ethnicity. As an IPPF summary of the benefits of cartoons explained, “[d]ue to their schematic way of depicting people, places, dwellings, etc., these films are not tied to a fixed and recognizable locale and can thus very effectively cross national boundaries.”<sup>52</sup> *Family Planning* was translated into twenty-three languages and distributed widely in Asia and Latin America.

Despite IPPF’s favorable analysis of the film’s success, the storyline drew on a tired plot that even in their view, had dominated family planning media for too long.<sup>53</sup> The formulaic comparison, pitting a large family against a smaller one in a competition for health and a good standard of living, had been evident in family planning media from as far back as the opening decades of the twentieth century. Nearly fifty years later, the idea was still widely used. In the simplistic juxtaposition presented in *Family Planning*, the larger family experienced a series of expensive crises while the smaller was able to gradually build wealth, illustrated in the

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<sup>51</sup> Eberwein, *Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 176.

<sup>52</sup> Untitled, not dated, and unpaginated International Planned Parenthood Federation document, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 6, Folder “IPPF Bogota Tapes.”

<sup>53</sup> IPPF untitled document, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 6, Folder “IPPF Bogota Tapes,” p. 8, p. 12.

acquisition of consumer goods (including, interestingly for this study, a radio—the fastest spreading communications technology of the time), education for the children, and enough land to share with offspring and sustain their families. Simply put, “families that do not plan their families are poor and unhealthy; families that do plan, own things, are healthy and have a ‘winners’ attitude towards life.”<sup>54</sup>

Family planning promoters did recognize the limitations of such exaggerated representations of the benefits of small families or the perils of larger ones relatively early, and by 1969, just two years after the Disney film, communications specialists were reporting the failure of this “threatening approach.”<sup>55</sup> Exaggeration could be interpreted as unrealistic and unbelievable, and viewers tended to reject fear-based appeals.<sup>56</sup> They were also likely to focus on the family most like themselves (the poor one) and see little in the experience of the wealthier group relevant to their own lives.<sup>57</sup> In an Indian poster campaign for example, observers had identified with an “unhappy family” of a large number of undernourished and badly clothed children rather than the well clothed and fed “happy family” with few children.<sup>58</sup> They may also have failed to buy into the consumerist model of upward mobility promoted in the film, and without craving the goods depicted found little of particular appeal. The economic argument also came under attack from critics in developing countries, who

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, J. T. Klapper, “Contributory Aspects of the Communication Situation” in *The Effects of Mass Communication* (New York: Free Press, 1969) and E. M. Rogers, *Communication Strategies for Family Planning*. Even so, some in the health communication community continue to promote the use of fear as a motivating force, although it was found largely ineffective in early HIV/AIDS education campaigns.

Fear-based communications has persisted despite evidence of its failure to effect long-term change. Abstinence only sex education and some HIV/AIDS prevention efforts are two major areas where it has been commonly employed.

<sup>56</sup> “Family Planning Programs,” *Population Reports J*, no. 23 (January-February 1981), 498.

<sup>57</sup> “Ibid.,” 499.

<sup>58</sup> “Notes on meeting held at 18 Lower Regent Street between representatives from the IPPF and ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations),” 2 June 1969, IPPF Roll 0433.

questioned the simplistic message that fertility control could solve social inequality. Over the course of the 1970s, this critique would radically reshape family planning media.

### **Turning Point - “No-one ever planned their family with a poster”<sup>59</sup>**

In 1973 delegates of the twenty-first annual conference of the IPPF reviewed the results of the first global study, “Survey of World Needs in Family Planning,” which estimated that 500 million women risked an unwanted pregnancy each year. Two thirds did so because of inadequate knowledge of contraception.<sup>60</sup> The early information campaigns as well as the motivational efforts of the late 1960s had clearly failed to help families put into practice the techniques of fertility control. If no one ever planned their families with a poster (as influential members of the family planning community now thought), why would a radio broadcast or a film prove any more effective? Certainly the massive expansion of media efforts had not translated into long-term change in family planning practices.

Family planning promoters were also beginning to express doubts about the direction taken by communications theory and questioning strategies “designed to convince, persuade or ‘engineer consent’” in the first place.<sup>61</sup> The latter phrase comes from a 1947 essay by public relations pioneer Edward Bernays, who had worked on the Dixie Cup promotion that made Hugh Moore’s fortune. While Moore had drawn

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<sup>59</sup> Dr. Malcolm Potts, former Medical Director of IPPF Central Office, quoted in “Background Paper,” Central Information and Education Committee, Working Party on Education and Training, 8-12 December 1975, IPPF Roll 0498, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Central Information and Education Committee, Working Party on Education and Training, “Report,” p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Introductory paragraph of Discussion Paper (1), January 1973, quoted in Central Information and Education Committee, Working Party on Education and Training, 8-12 December 1975, “Background Paper,” IPPF roll 0498, Section 2, p. 17.

on everything he had learned from Bernays in his efforts to publicize the population explosion in the 1950s, by 1973 members of the family planning community had begun to reject such tactics.<sup>62</sup> The debate was moving beyond the question of whether or not media persuasion actually succeeded in changing attitudes and behavior, to a reappraisal of the ethics of attempting to do so.

The international community was as divided on the question of how influential media should be as those working within the United States, where Planned Parenthood's discussions of media campaigns had taken a controversial turn on the issue. For some, this came down to a clear distinction between genres as well as message. Donald Bogue, of the influential Chicago school of communications research, drew a strict delineation:

Information is defined as communication of facts. It is a representation of truth as it is understood. We may act out these truths in dramatic form to help people see reality as it really exists. This leads to the documentary film or radio program or the documentary pamphlet. Reports of actual or imaginary but typical personal experiences may be a part of information programs...

Propaganda is defined as emotional appeals and the exaggeration, distortion, or suppression of facts. Propaganda goes beyond facts. It tries to persuade through playing on the emotions instead of appealing to the intellect."<sup>63</sup>

Motivational film incorporated elements of both categories—facts, personal experiences, and emotional appeals. For family planning promoters, the question was whether communications specialists had pushed persuasion too far.

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<sup>62</sup> Bernays had worked on health topics promoting the fluoridation campaign of the Public Health Service in the early 1950s and the National Multiple Sclerosis Society between 1954 and 1961, but he was also known for more notorious efforts including the promotion of smoking for women in the 1920s and the overthrow of the elected president of Guatemala in 1954.

<sup>63</sup> Donald J. Bogue, "Propaganda versus Information in Family Planning Programs," in *Mass Communication and Motivation for Birth Control*, ed. Donald J. Bogue (Chicago: Community and Family Study Center, 1967), 179-182, 179; emphasis in original.

At the same time, a confluence of other factors threatened the credibility of the family planning movement and helped to usher in a new era. Firstly, the end of the overpopulation crisis in the United States and the domestic backlash towards family planning described in chapter three began to undermine support and funding for international efforts. Conservative groups as well as feminists also took issue with the movement's motives for promoting family planning overseas and criticized strategies they argued led to the coercion of vulnerable men and women. Family planning advocates critical of the excesses of population control bemoaned the authoritarian, undemocratic, hierarchical structure of media communication, and the sole emphasis on reproduction when families faced significant challenges to their own health and well-being and that of their children.<sup>64</sup> They shunned old habits such as appealing to male decision-makers rather than attempting to improve the status of women, relying on short-term goals of recruiting new users rather than sustaining long-term practices, and a narrow focus on family planning as a medical issue without enough attention to wider social changes such as employment for women, social security for old age, and tax reforms which would encourage smaller family size and benefit families.<sup>65</sup> The field's focus on the materialistic benefits of smaller families, exemplified in the large family/small family narrative common in family planning media, did not address the "revolution in sexual mores" required across a wide variety of cultures to make family planning an accessible choice for women.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "Central Information & Education Committee, Working Party on Education and Training," p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Florangel Z. Rosario, "Why Aren't We Communicating As We Ought To?," (paper presented at the International Colloquium on Social Psychiatric Implications of Population Control, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, May 11-12, 1973).

<sup>66</sup> "Central Information & Education Committee, Working Party on Education and Training," p. 5.

The international meetings organized by the United Nations set the tone for a new approach. In 1974, at the World Population Conference in Bucharest, participants agreed that family planning should be seen as part of the process of social change and development and that access to education on the issue was a fundamental human right. The consensus at the World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico in 1975 reaffirmed the notion that family planning education and services are not only good for women's health but also integral to improving the lives, status of, and opportunities for women.

Internal documents from the IPPF illustrate how significantly these ideas reshaped the media strategies of family planning promoters. One report, for example, cited the work of Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire, who put forth an influential proposal to radically reframe education as an exercise in "conscientization" to empower peasant classes with an understanding of their own oppression, giving them the means to act in their own interests.<sup>67</sup> The IPPF document concluded that "the realization that an individual can control his or her fertility and, in this respect at least, is not in the hands of destiny" could be seen as part of such a process.<sup>68</sup>

The IPPF formed a Working Party on Education and Training to evaluate existing strategies in light of the challenges raised at the Bucharest meeting. The group again faulted the lack of communication strategies specific to family planning communication and the reliance on "borrowed models" from other fields, particularly

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<sup>67</sup> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London, England: Continuum Publishing Company, 1970). As theorists evaluated the failure of reforms intended to extend schooling more broadly to impoverished populations, the kind of education that would best equip all individuals to fulfill their potential was being reconsidered. Although formal education had been massively expanded, drop-out rates were high, teaching did not match job market needs, and because adults were excluded illiteracy remained widespread.

<sup>68</sup> Central Information and Education Committee, Working Party on Education and Training, "Background Paper," p. 12.

health communication. “Contraception has been seen as a ‘habit’ which can be acquired much as preventative measures to combat dysentery or malaria,” stated their background paper.<sup>69</sup> Such an approach completely eclipsed the structural barriers affecting the freedom of men, and especially of women, to choose how and when to control their fertility.

The IPPF focused on transforming family planning into a popular movement with grassroots participation, as part of a wider effort to improve economic circumstances and access to education. The new philosophy neatly dovetailed with shifting emphasis in communications from messaging to transparency, based on growing evidence of the poor impact of several of the standard approaches to mass communication, including fear-based appeals, exaggerated claims of negative or positive effects, or one-sided narratives that played down real problems such as contraceptive side-effects or social stigma. Experience had shown that the mass media was effective at dispelling rumors, but only if the source was information untainted by any perceived agenda. Where “counter-propaganda” against family planning was expected, presenting both positive and negative sides of the issue was more effective than simply sticking to a promotional message.<sup>70</sup>

Reflecting their growing confidence in the universal value of family planning and a relaxation of the reins over their media efforts, IPPF proposed offering an information service, where instead of trying to convert journalists to a particular point of view they would provide access to up-to-date information, hoping to prevent “the dissemination of unfavorable comment, often arising out of ignorance, which spilled

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-2.

<sup>70</sup> Rosario, “Why Aren’t We Communicating As We Ought To?,” 3.

over from one country to another” via transparency rather than a particular messaging strategy.<sup>71</sup> In 1976 the organization formalized their shift to a more community-oriented approach to public education in a new policy. The strategy had three main components: to intensify efforts to reach rural people, to integrate family planning with other development programs (and move away from a medical service model), and to create more of a “popular movement” through wider community participation in the design and delivery of family planning.<sup>72</sup> A copy was sent to education reformer Paulo Freire.<sup>73</sup> Mass media campaigns could still play a role, but the time had come to re-frame their contribution. In the rest of this chapter I explore some of the new media that resulted.

## **The Transformation of Family Planning Film**

The changing approach is evident in shifting approaches taken by one of the most prolific American filmmakers of the period. In 1972, Phyllis Tilson Piotrow, a former assistant to General William Draper (the figure behind the Draper report that had recommended US investment in the overpopulation issue) and a leading figure in the population control movement, launched the Population Information Program (PIP), under contract to USAID.<sup>74</sup> The same year, Dr. Murdoch Head, a Virginia physician and entrepreneur, established the Airlie Foundation to work closely with PIP through its profit-making film company, Ravens Hollow, to produce family

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<sup>71</sup> Central Information & Education Committee, Working Party on Publications & Information Flow, 26-29 January 1976, “Report,” p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> “IPPF’S New Educational Policy: Implications for ESAE & OR,” ROLL 0498, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> Irmela Köhler to Susan Perl, 20 October 1976, ROLL 0498.

<sup>74</sup> The Population Information Program began at George Washington University and moved to Johns Hopkins in 1978. In 1982 it was renamed Population Communication Services.



planning films for worldwide distribution. Between 1971 and 1978, USAID awarded \$16.6 million to Airlie and PIP.<sup>75</sup> The Airlie Foundation made more than 100 films on population and health issues during this time.<sup>76</sup>

The foundation developed three types of productions: instructional or technical films for medical personnel, information films on the specifics of reproduction and contraceptive technologies for the public and family planning field workers, and “general films” highlighting population issues and family planning projects around the world, which made up the largest subsection and are my focus.<sup>77</sup> These were set in a wide variety of international locations and were available with different language soundtracks. In the past, the IPPF had complained that American film producers were unwilling to spend money customizing films for one region when it represented only one small part of the total global market. As they reported, “a Family Planning film made for an American audience is considered ready for release in the WHR [Western Hemisphere Region] as soon as its sound track is dubbed into Spanish.”<sup>78</sup> Just as Planned Parenthood had begun to consider the differences among their media audiences at home, family planning promoters working on international projects also realized that materials developed for one region could not necessarily be effectively used elsewhere. Airlie tackled this issue by providing films for specific regions, such as Latin America, using unspecified locations from the area and common themes.

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<sup>75</sup> “FBI Probing AID Pacts with Airlie,” *The Washington Post*, 23 February 1978.

<sup>76</sup> Phyllis T. Piotrow, D. Lawrence Kincaid, Jose G. Rimon II, and Ward Rinehart, *Health Communication: Lessons from Family Planning and Reproductive Health* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1997).

<sup>77</sup> As stated in my introduction, this study leaves aside technical/information films to focus specifically on the persuasive or motivational examples.

<sup>78</sup> Untitled International Planned Parenthood Federation document, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 6, Folder “IPPF Bogota Tapes.”

Expert reviewers complained, however, that because the Spanish translation was sometimes badly done and revealed American accents, this was likely to undermine the persuasiveness of the film for Latin American audiences. Films developed for different regions also posed translation problems. Even audiences who shared the same language may have had difficulty understanding films made in other places, such as Caribbean-made films that other English language audiences found hard to interpret. Similarly, audiences who learned English from British teachers struggled to interpret American accents.<sup>79</sup>

Airlie's first USAID-funded film project was to develop films for the elite of Latin America, during a period when Catholic opposition to contraception silenced public debate on the subject as well as the open distribution of services. Some of the earlier examples strike a tone of urgency reminiscent of the early years of overpopulation fear in the United States. *Countdown to Collision* (1973), for example, produced in English and Spanish, includes scenes of catastrophic devastation, pollution and overcrowding to emphasize the burden of an unrestricted growth rate on the world's limited resources.<sup>80</sup> As developing nations began to see overpopulation as a serious internal issue, rather than rejecting it as a preoccupation of industrialized nations, the tone of the films changed, remaining urgent but becoming more optimistic than the classic fear of overpopulation approach first presented to American audiences in the 1950s and sixties.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> "Family Planning Programs," *Population Reports*, 498.

<sup>80</sup> Film viewed at the National Library of Medicine.

<sup>81</sup> Examples include Planned Parenthood's *The Costly Crowd* (ca. 1965), viewed at the National Library of Medicine and *Brazil: The Gathering Millions* (1967).

In a 1976 evaluation of Airlie's work, Latin American physicians from the family planning community took issue with the tone of such films and the implication that slowed population growth was a panacea for all social and economic ills. Their comments mirror the objections expressed by leaders of developing nations to the emphasis on population control at the Bucharest meeting in 1974. Despite their interest in family planning, these critics argued that social change, not simply population control, was required if poverty was to be properly addressed.<sup>82</sup> Some also felt that the films gave too positive a representation of conditions, showing the "touristy" view rather than the hard realities of life for the rural poor, a representational strategy that American filmmakers may have considered a polite way to address the issue but which fell short of drawing attention to the inequities those campaigning for broader social change in the region wanted to highlight.

The team at Airlie responded to such objections and the changing tide in their field by presenting a less hysterical evaluation of the impact of overpopulation and broadening their depictions of its causes, consequences, and options for improving the situation. *Mexico in the Year 2000* (1979), for example, features upbeat music throughout and a focus on the children who will learn from the viewing generation's example even as it traces population growth from 14 million people at the start of the century to 65 million by 1979, and predicts an overwhelming 132 million by its end.<sup>83</sup> The film highlights the encroachment of cities onto farmland, the rise of pollution, the decline of rural jobs due to agricultural mechanization, and stresses. Footage of slum

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<sup>82</sup> Reviewers also took issue with the emphasis on the IUD rather than other forms of contraception in technical/instructional films. The productions glossed over discomfort in the fitting process as well as possible complications, and some included outdated or incomplete information, referring to the Dalkon Shield, for example, long after its use had been banned.

<sup>83</sup> Film viewed at the National Library of Medicine.

life is briefly included, along with a great deal of imagery of working people undertaking backbreaking labor to earn a living. The narrator states that many of the new jobs in the changing economy will require fewer workers with a higher level of education than the vanishing farm jobs did. Overall, the tone is positive, emphasizing opportunities in the emerging oil and gas industries, the great breakthroughs in child survival and healthcare that contributed to the population growth, the availability of government-supported family planning, and the idea that the right balance can be achieved.

By 1976, according to the USAID evaluation, motivation was less “relevant” than it had been when Airlie first started its work in Latin America in 1971, presumably as a result of the increasing interest in population control within developing nations.<sup>84</sup> Although the film campaign was likely a minor factor in the shift in attitudes from population control to reproductive rights, given the role of unemployment, urban overcrowding, and rising poverty, a report for USAID did suggest “perhaps Airlie films can be credited for some small part of this trend.”<sup>85</sup>

As a result of the shift, later films took up the other issues that were emerging in the international field of family planning, especially the role of women. *Tú* (*You*, 1976) tells the story of a young couple, Pedro and Elena, and their decision to wait to have children and to only have two.<sup>86</sup> A voiceover narrates the story of their life together over scenes of the couple. Excerpts of their Spanish conversation can be overheard as the film dramatizes their relationship and their disagreement over when

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<sup>84</sup> Juárez and Associates, Inc. “Evaluation of Airlie Foundation Film Production: A Final Report,” 18 December 1976, 168.

<sup>85</sup> The report allowed for some measure of success in this way whilst carefully tempering the possible conclusion that a specific film could be directly linked to changes in attitude. Juárez et al, iv.

<sup>86</sup> Film viewed at the National Library of Medicine.

to marry. Pedro, a medical student, would like to wed early and move in with his parents. Elena, who is training to be a teacher, dreams of a house of their own and persuades him to wait. As the narrator notes, she “speaks for a newly articulate world of brides-to-be,” women who do not want to rush into marriage and motherhood.

In the decisive scene that changes Pedro’s mind, Elena shows him what she has been learning in her economics class. The economic argument is still central in this example of family planning promotion then, but interestingly here it is laid out in a newly transparent way, with the narrator asserting that this approach “almost always triumphs,” implying that individuals can use the same technique first proffered in family planning media in their own negotiations with partners, family, and friends. The image of the female character calculating the cost of one child and explaining the price of a large family to her male companion marks a major break from past presentations of harried and disheveled wives struggling at home with large families while their husbands try to make a living. Furthermore, while Pedro says he wants three boys and one girl, Elena asks why not one boy, and one girl, two boys, or even two girls? At the end of the film, after she has won him round to her way of thinking, we see the couple walking towards the camera happily with their son and daughter.

In *Dos Caminos* (*Two Roads*, 1979), two young women from a rural town somewhere in Central America move to the city to pursue an education. The film begins as Yolanda arrives back in her hometown alone, and reflects on their experiences. She and a male narrator tell the story, again as the scenes and dialogue play out beneath the voiceovers. Yolanda studies hard to become a nurse but her friend Consuelo becomes wrapped up in the excitement of city living, neglects her

studies, and falls for the charms of a young man. After becoming pregnant, she undergoes an illegal abortion. Yolanda discovers her ill in bed at home and takes her to the hospital, but Consuelo dies.

Yolanda returns to her town to try and prevent such tragedies, taking up a job at the local clinic to provide women with information on family planning. Consuelo's downfall is blamed on her lack of experience and education. The narrator also singles out the romantic ideals peddled by cinema and television (as opposed to the purposeful dramas created by family planning promoters, presumably), and notes that young girls are made vulnerable by a lack of information and men's ability to simply walk away from the situation. As he intones over the scene where Consuelo's boyfriend first asks if she's sure the baby is his, rejects the idea of marriage and says he knows a woman who will take care of it before leaving her, "as young girls have been left alone in such circumstances all over the world, all through time."

The narrative is sympathetic to the young woman's plight, and creates a moving story while also cleverly utilizing opportunities for more straightforward messaging. Scenes of Yolanda at college, for example, provide the opportunity for her to recall what she has learned about female fertility. She reflects on her studies, and then repeats while trying to warn Yolanda that after the onset of menstruation girls can become pregnant at any time. In a scene where Consuelo tells her of her problem, Yolanda stridently argues that it is also the responsibility of her boyfriend, and that she must tell him so the two of them can deal with it together. Of course his only suggestion was that Consuelo should have an abortion. The film thus critiques male irresponsibility at the same time that it presents it as inevitable.

Airlie's earlier attempts to show empowered women had been poorly received by the USAID reviewers. The filmmakers sometimes included local influential figures to appease their objections to family planning, but research had shown that doing so quickly dated a film.<sup>87</sup> Films featuring specific women in leadership roles were ridiculed as depicting exceptional individuals rather than the experiences of the majority of Latin American women. This approach was also problematic because it had the potential to alienate viewers who disagreed with the politics of a particular individual shown. Some of the women people profiled by Airlie were seen as merely symbols rather than effective leaders. As one reviewer commented, the female senators shown in *Cita en Santo Domingo* (*Rendezvous in Santa Domingo* ca. 1973) "are a joke... they have no power."<sup>88</sup> Stories of more universal experiences, like those described above, were potentially timeless, less vulnerable to the dynamics of local political cycles, and more realistic to viewers skeptical of the changing roles of women in public life. While depictions of female politicians pushed the idea of changing gender roles too far for some viewers, women playing nurses or teachers could still illustrate modern values and education, within the confines of these traditionally female occupations.

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<sup>87</sup> Juárez et al, "Evaluation of Airlie Foundation Film Production," ii.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 129.

## The Failures of Film

The vast amount of money spent on film in this period raised the question of whether this investment was in fact paying off.<sup>89</sup> Airlie films ran from thirty seconds to thirty minutes in length, and cost around \$1800 to \$2058 per minute of finished film, compared to the average cost of films made for government agencies of \$1236, due to the expense of filming in foreign countries and the widely acknowledged superior technical quality of the finished product. The majority ran at around twenty minutes and could be bought for \$70, \$130 less than films of the same length produced by Planned Parenthood. Still, at a cost of almost \$30,000 to produce dissemination needed to be fairly extensive to justify expenditure even if there was no expectation of recouping costs.

According to a USAID evaluation, distribution of the Airlie catalog was problematic, however. Some films were frequently requested, while others languished on the shelves. This had less to do with the relevance or quality of the film than with the word-of-mouth promotion of certain films once groups started using them. Because they were made without a specific distribution plan in place for target countries, some never gained the publicity needed to promote them. Established media channels, such as broadcast television, were apparently reluctant to show the films on the grounds that they were unsuitable, but more likely because no effort was made to court television producers such collaboration could not be established. Attempts to create a centralized film distribution service, such as a combined effort between the IPPF, UNESCO, and UNFPA in operation from 1972 to 1975, were

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<sup>89</sup> The range comes from different figures cited in Juárez et al, "Evaluation of Airlie Foundation Film Production," 29 and "Family Planning Programs," 497. The average cost of films for the government was calculated for those produced in 1972.



short-lived.<sup>90</sup> With films likely to have a different reception from country to country, considered relevant in one but not in another, large-scale dissemination across broad regions was ineffective.

More generally, film also provided numerous opportunities for audiences to misinterpret intended messages. As a later report by the Johns Hopkins University communications program that would inherit the Airlie collaboration put it, “the medium itself may distract from the message,” a phenomenon not fully appreciated in the enthusiasm for using the technology in the 1960s and seventies.<sup>91</sup> The IPPF concluded, for example, that “many people cannot perceive symbolic representations of an object,” such as a picture of an item that is larger in size than the original artifact.<sup>92</sup> Some of these difficulties had been evident with the basic technology of the poster or flip-chart, as in one example where only four out of twenty-five traditional birth attendants in a nutrition class in India could identify common vegetables from color illustrations.<sup>93</sup> The communications specialist who observed this phenomenon did not consider the possibility that the birth attendants may have been unfamiliar with the specific foods depicted, or explain if they were characteristic of the region or well drawn. Negative results were frequently taken at face value instead, as health communications experts minimized the visual literacy of their target audiences.

Film was thought to compound some of the problems seen with other media. Even in Latin America, with its long history of cultural exchange with America, the

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<sup>90</sup> “Family Planning Programs,” 500.

<sup>91</sup> *Population Reports J*, no. 1 (1981), 493.

<sup>92</sup> Everett M. Rogers, Douglas Solomon and Ronny Adhikarya, *Further Directions for USAID’s Communication Policies in Population* (Stanford University: Institute for Communication Research: 1978), 178.

<sup>93</sup> “Family Planning Programs,” 499.

conventions of visual display and narrative apparently created problems. In a classic example from a Walt Disney film on malaria which included several close-ups of a mosquito, farmers in a rural community laughingly reported after watching the film, “[N]ow we understand why you Americans are so worried about malaria, you have such big mosquitoes in your country.”<sup>94</sup> While it is not clear if the viewers were mocking their visitors, health communications experts took such comments very seriously. If the assessments made by family planning promoters were accurate, the implications for family planning imagery were potentially disastrous. A close-up or zoom in on an IUD device, for instance, could easily give a misleading and terrifying impression of the size of the device and its effects. Partial representations of body parts and unnatural colors might also confuse viewers.<sup>95</sup>

With their dubious assessment of the media literacy of target audiences, the IPPF complained that many films were “too sophisticated” and included “too many ‘nice things’ to see and hear [which] distract the audience from the family planning message.”<sup>96</sup> Using the local language did not render images produced elsewhere meaningful for audiences new to film, especially if the format was unfamiliar in that region, as was documentary outside the West in the 1970s.<sup>97</sup> Flashbacks might be difficult to comprehend if audiences hadn’t seen them before. Complicated plots lost the viewer, no matter how closely they concentrated on the storyline. Viewers tended to focus on the visuals and ignore a voiceover altogether if the two competed for their

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<sup>94</sup> Nancy Dammann, “Know Your Audience,” in *Communicating Family Planning: Speak, They Are Listening, Selected Readings* (East-West Institute, n.d.), 64.

<sup>95</sup> “Family Planning Programs,” 499.

<sup>96</sup> Rogers et al, *Further Directions for USAID’s Communication in Population*, 179-180.

<sup>97</sup> Isaacs, “The Use of Traditional Art Forms in Association with Mass Media for Social Development Programmes (With Special Reference to Family Planning Programs),” Prepared for the UNESCO/IPPF Expert Group Meeting on the Integrated Use of Folk Media and Mass Media in Family Planning Communications, November 1972, 15.

attention. Yet simplistic films were unsuitable in countries with indigenous film production and among educated audiences. An early animated film used in Brazil, for example, was apparently very popular with village viewers who watched it repeatedly (although apparently they did not understand its family planning message), while health workers felt the simplistic approach insulted their intelligence.<sup>98</sup> In urban areas where viewers had access to high-quality entertainment film, such as India, family planning media had to match the same level of production values and dramatic sophistication. As communications specialists began to realize, separate films were needed for distinct audiences *within* each country, not just for the different regions of the world. Attempting to reach both with the same production could mean neither groups was won over.

Of course it is difficult to tease out the facts of the situation with so many variables shaping an audience's reactions, from the possibility that viewers were simply bored with a particular media presentation to the prospect that they were well aware of their teachers' low opinions of their capacity to understand and choosing to reinforce or make fun of such perceptions. Whatever the audience issues at the beginning of media campaigns, it is likely that viewers would adapt to the new media after repeated exposure. For this study it is enough to note that family planning promoters became increasingly pessimistic about their audience's abilities to comprehend messages in "foreign" formats.

Audience research across other areas of media communication had long suggested that viewers tended to pay the most attention to messages that corresponded with their beliefs, and to reject those which didn't. While a film might

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<sup>98</sup> "Family Planning Programs," 499.

help reinforce an existing attitude, or provide further information or justification for it, could motivational media messaging really transform incompatible views or behavior?<sup>99</sup>

In addition to content issues, there were also a host of practical problems to be faced. The need to expand into rural communities necessitated greater cost-effectiveness. As well as the usual difficulties of clearing customs, problems delivering audiovisual materials were increasing with the rising costs of transportation. There were challenges maintaining the broadcasting equipment and training fieldworkers in the use of the technology, and wastefulness in the production of materials, with artists redrawing standard medical illustrations and producers remaking the same kinds of films over and over. Most significantly, the films could not stand alone--viewers usually required a discussion of the ideas seen to help them relate the message to their own needs and experiences.<sup>100</sup> The IPPF reported that many program staff selected films inappropriate for a particular audience, without any awareness of how to present them or follow-up after a showing. All of these difficulties fed into growing dissatisfaction with film among family planning promoters and the communications experts they collaborated. As the challenges began to outweigh the benefits of this expensive strategy they began to explore other media options.

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<sup>99</sup> These issues were acknowledged early on in professional communications study but did not slow the development of family planning motivational media. See, for example, D. Cartwright, "Some Principles on Mass Persuasion: Selected Findings of Research on the Sale of United States War Bonds," *Human Relations* 2, no. 3 (July 1949) and P.F. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson, and H. Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, (New York, Columbia University Press: 1948).

<sup>100</sup> "Family Planning Programs," 495.

## Moving into Folk Media

Convincing a skeptical public to pay attention to messages devised in other countries and disseminated via “foreign” technologies such as film had been a major challenge. Instead, some communications specialists turned to the traditional arts that had entertained communities over hundreds of years. This “folk media” included songs, dance, plays, storytelling, proverbs, and puppet shows, and offered important advantages over the high-technology media formats most popular in the 1960s beyond simply their lower cost. As filmmakers Anthony and Elizabeth Isaacs reported at a UNESCO/IPPF meeting on the subject in 1972, “[b]y using the various folk arts, we are immediately working on established channels of communication within the particular society concerned and speaking to people in a language which is familiar to them.”<sup>101</sup> Performances could be adapted to feature local elements or references and to respond to the reactions of the audience. The methods were also inexpensive and easily portable. Folk media was thought to be especially useful as these traditional formats were popular among rural villagers, the main target audience and the one considered most resistant to family planning messaging. Puppets, clown characters, or masked or mystical storytellers could also communicate difficult ideas about sex and contraception usually unsaid by “real” speakers in such public forums.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Isaacs, “The Use of Traditional Art Forms in Association with Mass Media for Social Development Programmes,” 1. Although this first meeting focused specifically on family planning the approach was soon considered for a wide range of development initiatives at other meetings on the subject in this period, including the UNESCO New Delhi Seminar and Workshop on Folk Media (1974) and the East West Communication Institute Seminar on Traditional Media (1975).

<sup>102</sup> Rogers et al, *Further Directions for USAID’s Communication Policies in Population*, 162.

Communications experts considered folk media more of an emotional and “moral” medium than an intellectual one. While this had deterred some from using it to deliver complex health information, others saw great potential in less didactic approaches for changing attitudes and behavior.<sup>103</sup> Some, however, questioned the idea of commandeering indigenous cultural forms in this way and warned of the risk of “cultural genocide” if communities realized that their traditional media had been corrupted, although it is likely that over their centuries of use these forms had been adapted for a wide variety of educational and even political purposes.<sup>104</sup> The key was to work with local artists to develop a performance that satisfied the performer’s creative standards as well as the goals of the family planning promoter. Most of the attendees at the UNESCO meeting where the approach was first laid out themselves came from the “traditional societies” where folk media was deemed most useful, giving the experiment the benefit of localized input and expertise.

This new strategy did have some limitations, however. Modernizing communities were liable to consider some traditional arts old-fashioned or “backward” and reject their messages. Materials had to be made locally, reflecting the same community as the intended audience, not only because unfamiliar dress and language could prove distracting but also because they could convey attitudes that contradicted local circumstances. A 1981 overview of films still in use mentioned specifically that the some depictions of women, for example, “might disturb some

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<sup>103</sup> G. H. Begbie, “Health Messages Through Folk Media: A Critical Review,” *Nursing Journal of India* 11 (1985) and 12 (1985).

<sup>104</sup> Victor T. Valbuena, “Using Folk Media in Development Programmes,” *Media Asia* 15, no. 3 (1988): 153.

audiences.”<sup>105</sup> The complex cultural significance of particular masks, ceremonies, or storylines could be lost on family planning promoters, who might inadvertently use these forms in an inappropriate way or select a style of delivery antithetical to the intended message.

One of the showcase projects was a Nigerian film of a play, called *My Brother's Children* (1970), produced by husband-and-wife team Anthony and Elizabeth Isaacs for the Family Planning Council of Nigeria and sponsored by the IPPF.<sup>106</sup> This hybrid format, of a film of a play, harnessed the benefits of a live performance and used a traditional format supposedly more inherently appealing to audiences, while eradicating the possibility that fluctuations in dialogue and action from one showing to another might alter or dilute the intended message. Having enjoyed a high level of control over their previous media productions, family planning promoters were clearly reluctant to loosen their hold on media productions.<sup>107</sup>

In Nigeria, where there were more than 200 distinctive ethnic groups and various languages and religions, a production made for one group was unlikely to appeal to another. Instead of attempting to produce something for the country as a whole, the Isaacs settled on the Yoruba-speaking peoples, who numbered 14 million in the early 1970s. The film was based on scrupulous research into Yoruba culture, and featured well-known actors speaking the language.<sup>108</sup> The filmmakers settled on a

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<sup>105</sup> “Family Planning Programs,” 494.

<sup>106</sup> The film cost \$22,000 to make, \$440 per minute. Ibid., 497.

<sup>107</sup> Unless otherwise noted all details of the film preparation, production, and reception are from the producers’ account, Isaacs, “The Use of Traditional Art Forms in Association with Mass Media for Social Development.” Quote from p. 15.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

traditional form of communication, the folk drama, which consisted of sketches and a song and dance. The format, usually a domestic comedy or, less often, a historical story, was already associated with didactic messaging and covered themes that related to the subject of family planning such as the proper treatment of wives and conflicts between old and new ways.

Large families, especially those with many sons, were traditionally revered in Yoruba culture and gave both women and men status in the community. Family planning was also opposed because of a belief in reincarnation, the idea that children were a gift from God, and a past high mortality rate of 40 percent for children under five. However, as mortality rates improved, families living in cities found schools and accommodation crowded and struggled with high food prices and unemployment. In urbanizing areas at least, values were beginning to shift to allow for the idea of limiting family size. The story is set in a small town considered the heartland of the Yoruba people. The site had been previously used for a very famous child health project, linking the plot to the improved mortality rates of infants that meant most now grew to adulthood causing the overcrowding experienced in towns.

The film's storyline dealt with the burden on a young man living in town, Mr Adeleke, who returns to visit his village under pressure to support his younger brother's large family. This narrative reflected the organization of family life in Nigeria, whereby elder sons were responsible for those of their brothers (especially after the death of the siblings' father), but also meant that the message did not single out the viewing individual. Rather than suggesting "you have too many children,"



noted the producers, the film instead said “your brother has too many children.”<sup>109</sup> The narrative also acknowledged the importance placed on childrearing traditionally, by having Mr Adeleke return to his village for the important naming ceremony intended to celebrate the arrival of his brother’s new child. The newborn is called Motunrayo, meaning “I am joyful again,” further underlining the joyous associations given a growing family in Nigerian culture.<sup>110</sup> This celebration of childrearing, seemingly at odds with a message of family limitation, in fact had a long history, from the earliest years of the birth control movement when smaller, happier, and healthier (or “fitter”) families were promoted, right through the heyday of the overpopulation argument, when Planned Parenthood were careful to stress that they were not against anyone having children but were instead proposing that everyone be given the means to plan when to have their families.

Various scenes in the film provide the opportunity to explain the possibilities of family planning and address the decision-making process in Yoruba families. When asked if he will take in some of his brother’s children, Mr Adeleke reveals that he can barely afford to keep his own, smaller family and educate his children, a goal of aspirational urban Nigerians. Mrs Adeleke goes to market with her sister-in-law and when she hears that the latter had to quickly return to work after the birth of her last child because of financial hardship, describes the work of the Family Planning Council of Nigeria. The scene relates to various aspects of gender relations in Nigeria that played into the acceptance of family planning: the fact that a large number of

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<sup>109</sup> Isaacs, “The Use of Traditional Art Forms in Association with Mass Media for Social Development Programmes,” 25.

<sup>110</sup> Francis Oluokun Okediji and William Ogionwo, *Experiment in Population Education and Attitude Change: An Evaluation of the Film “My Brother’s Children” in Two Rural Nigerian Communities* (Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1973), 7.

Yoruba women participated in long-distance trade (as evidenced by the market), which exposed them to new ideas; that women need economic independence in polygamous societies; and that men and women share decision-making in towns but are less likely to in villages, where a larger family unit is involved.

No sets were used, in keeping with the preference among African audiences to see films set in real places. Because folk performances are generally unscripted, the Isaacs avoided some of the strategies of film production, such as multiple takes from various angles, which relied upon the uniform repetition of the same lines of dialogue. Instead, they use a series of longer “master takes” for each scene containing the dialogue within one shot. Although the edited production had none of the quick cutting effects commonly used in contemporary film, the “stagey” effect produced by the master-take approach actually suited the content as audiences expected the theatrical style of a play. As was traditional with folk drama, the performers gestured along to some of the dialogue, a useful strategy given that audience members tended to talk freely during performances.

The finished product was shown on Nigerian television as well as via projector in various communities, and was discussed on numerous radio shows in West Africa and BBC World Radio. Two universities added the production to their archives of classic Yoruba-language materials. Kola Ogunmola, the performer who helped develop the material and starred in the film, was reportedly “delighted” to show it whenever he was on tour having been provided with a projector by IPPF.<sup>111</sup> Viewers apparently enjoyed seeing their community depicted in color (a rare event as

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<sup>111</sup> Isaacs, “The Use of Traditional Art Forms in Association with Mass Media for Social Development Programmes,” 28.

there were few commercial films at this time and television plays were shown in black and white), and commonly returned for repeat showings. Many commented that they recognized the reality of the problem depicted. The film was also popular among audiences beyond the original target group, including the key demographic of university students (who would become community elites), health and development workers, and government staff who were impressed by the “integrity” of the film and considered it “a genuinely African product.”<sup>112</sup>

Although many Nigerian viewers were enthusiastic, family planning promoters were less impressed and doubted that the film was effective in delivering the desired message. William O. Sweeney, a communications specialist at the Ford Foundation, felt that the attention to Yoruba culture overshadowed the actual message of the story.<sup>113</sup> Nigerian sociologists evaluating the film had a more nuanced assessment. They were generally supportive of the attention to cultural detail they did note that in at least one instance, when a character advises his daughter to plan her family when she gets married, the film departs from Yoruba realism and reveals “too conscious an effort” to get the message across.”<sup>114</sup> In their view, the guise of entertainment was thus undermined by heavy-handed preaching.

Despite the concerns of family planning promoters that visual materials were difficult for audiences new to film to understand, the Nigerian evaluators found that the visual cues in *My Brother's Children*, such as the apparent affluence of Mr and Mrs Adeleke conveyed by their dress and healthy appearance, were more readily recalled by viewers than the discussions in the dialogue. The authors of the evaluation

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>113</sup> “Family Planning Programs,” 502.

<sup>114</sup> Okediji and Ogionwo, *Experiment in Population Education and Attitude Change*, 58.

concluded that, “[t]he brain as it were closes itself to the messages directed at the ear but the eye continues to see, incapable of resisting the fascination of moving images projected on the screen.” Leaving aside the question of whether visual messaging was indeed more powerful than verbal, or less open to resistance, it certainly compensated for some of the practical difficulties preventing audiences from fully engaging with the spoken narrative. As the report made clear, viewers tended to talk to one another during the showing and to come and go throughout as they would during other village entertainment. There was also competing noise from attending children as well as the distraction of the technology of film (particularly the projector) to contend with.<sup>115</sup> Visual cues were important in reinforcing or restating the aural messaging in such contexts.

While this evaluation, (the most comprehensive account I have found), provides some useful insights into the use of family planning media it is also deeply flawed, given that the test audience was not the intended target for the film. Made for people living in towns, it was unlikely to win over the rural viewers who watched it, given that the storyline focused on the burdens of a town dweller reluctant to support his brother in the countryside. The researchers compared attitudes to family planning among one rural community before and after they were shown the film, with those of a control community who did not see it. At the start of the study, over half of both groups already expressed a favorable attitude, which the authors attributed to the previous decade of programs and publicity campaigns around the country.<sup>116</sup> Critically, those who were unaware of any effective methods for preventing

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 28, 41-42.

conception were less likely to support the idea of it, while those who knew of techniques were more supportive. As the film was more motivational than informational (in that it dealt with the reasons for using contraception rather than any detailed discussion of techniques), those lacking in this knowledge were likely to remain ignorant and therefore unsupportive. Of course family planning promoters had shied away from extensive technical descriptions in films for general audiences, believing they were too clinical for general viewers and thus more suitable for healthcare providers. They were also mindful of cultural prohibitions against discussion of the processes of reproduction among mixed audiences. I would argue that, ironically, the finding that knowledge of contraception was in itself motivational suggests that some of the vast amounts of funding spent on persuasive media may have been more usefully directed towards simply educational strategies.

The study concluded that the film, while enjoyed by most viewers, was barely recalled by most and had no discernable impact on opinion. As the authors summarized, “[t]he film show was an experience—shortlived, ephemeral, folded in the darkness of the evening and gone for ever.”<sup>117</sup> The following day the pressures of work and survival in a rural economy, which viewers did not connect to the story of city dwellers they had watched, took over. Doubtless the disconnection between the intended audience and the one evaluated explains some of this. Consigning viewers to a passive role of spectatorship may also have contributed to the problem. In the final section of this chapter, I turn to a more participatory form of communication proposed for the promotion of family planning.

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<sup>117</sup> Okediji and Ogionwo, *Experiment in Population Education and Attitude Change*, 53.

## **Feminism and New Media Strategies**

Martha Stuart, whose work as a media specialist at Planned Parenthood in the early 1960s and television series *Are You Listening?* was discussed in the previous chapter, was galvanized to expand her work overseas by the 1974 International Population Conference in Bucharest. Village women were not included in the event although they were often the topic of discussion: instead, the men who dominated the leadership in the global family planning movement, and some women, spoke for them. Deciding to bring her model of participatory communication to women in rural communities around the world, Stuart set off for Egypt with portable video technology that had only just been introduced. As the destinations multiplied, the range of issues she tackled also expanded: in later projects she interviewed men in Colombia who were planning to have a vasectomy, Palestinian refugees, and, on her last filmmaking trip, Native Alaskans struggling to preserve their traditional way of life. She developed a large collection of work on family planning issues in India, Colombia, Jamaica, Egypt, Mexico, and Indonesia. Although the programs were originally intended for use in the country in which they were produced, they were also picked up for broadcast in Canada, Australia, and America (where there were 81 commercial broadcasts and over 2000 public broadcasts in 1982 alone). The following year, PBS showed 46 programs, the entire collection available by that time.<sup>118</sup>

Unlike film, the mobility of video technology meant that the tools could be taken from village to village, so people could participate in recordings for their own

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<sup>118</sup> Martha Stuart to William L. Bondurant, 1 September 1982, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 13, Folder "AYL Abortion Babcock Proposal."

communities. By the late 1970s, family planning promoters were critiquing the urban bias of media materials and calling for localized materials focused on smaller, rural communities.<sup>119</sup> Tailoring film or television to discrete groups was too expensive to justify such limited use, but video could much more cheaply accomplish this specificity. An added benefit was that video production and distribution could be undertaken wholly outside of the hierarchical systems of film or broadcasting, which tended to exclude “ordinary” people or grassroots programming.<sup>120</sup>

Having worked as a journalist for several years, Stuart was convinced that the media could give marginalized groups a voice in public debate, but she wanted to improve the process. Her aim was to provide a forum for people to express their own views, without the mediation of a writer or editor. Her series did not focus on the political leaders or medical experts that commonly framed the news coverage of the topic, but instead brought together people who had personal experiences of the subject under discussion. This approach departed markedly from that used earlier in the birth control and family planning movement. As a means to appear legitimate despite dealing with sexual topics, radio and film producers of birth control programming in the first half of the twentieth century had often included an “expert,” usually a physician, to advance the narrative and deliver the story’s message. This strategy reflected the high status of the physician in American society for most of the twentieth century. Historians have noted the gradual “disappearance of the doctor” from advertisements for drugs and therapies as new medical technologies and pharmaceuticals displaced the traditional skills of the physician after the Second

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<sup>119</sup> Rogers et al, *Further Directions for USAID’s Communication Policies in Population*, 177.

<sup>120</sup> Martha Stuart, “Videotape and the Indonesian Family Planning/Population Program,” 1978, Martha Stuart Papers, Carton 14, Folder [Other Proposals], pp. 5-6.

World War.<sup>121</sup> The growing feminist critique of the medical profession, as well as the development of a women's health movement in the 1960s, further undermined the status of the physician particularly in the arena of sex and reproduction.<sup>122</sup> Stuart's approach was very much in keeping with this new mindset and reflected her goals to provide ordinary people with "unmediated" access to the channels of public debate. Her novel strategy, as described by the IPPF (one of her funders), was "to give a voice to the people of the region whose opinions we have ignored so far."<sup>123</sup>

Stuart's approach was a direct response to criticism of the top-down communications of previous years, giving groups an opportunity to air their own views and perspectives. Whether any of the people approached about family planning would want to share their real opinions, on camera, with a stranger from the United States, was one of her early concerns, but she claimed the process was actually less challenging abroad than it had been back at home. In Colombia, for example, she reported that it was "easy to establish the fact that I didn't have a hidden agenda and that I was really interested in what they thought and felt and that there was nothing I needed to hear them say nor was I going to judge them."<sup>124</sup>

Over the course of a videotaping session, Stuart asked open-ended questions to start a discussion. As the goal was to air opinions rather than to come to any kind of agreement, she solicited different perspectives on the same issue and let

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<sup>121</sup> Jonathan Metzl, "The Pharmaceutical Gaze: Psychiatry, Scopophilia, and Psychotropic Medication Advertising, 1964-1985" and Marc Cohen and Audrey Shafer, "Images and Healers: A Visual History of Scientific Medicine," in *Cultural Sutures: Medicine and Media*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>122</sup> Sheryl Ruzek, *The Women's Health Movement: Feminist Alternatives to Medical Control* (New York, 1978) and Sandra Morgen, *Into Our Own Hands: The Women's Health Movement* (New Brunswick, 2002).

<sup>123</sup> IPPF untitled document, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 6, Folder "IPPF Bogota Tapes," p. 16.

<sup>124</sup> Profamilia to Martha Stuart, 6 Sept 1971, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 6, Folder "IPPF Bogota Tapes."



disagreements stand. The format was unusually informal and antagonized some reviewers, who could not resist comparing it unfavorably to more traditional formats.

In *Library Journal*, describing the program “Indochina Refugees,” one complained

the program has no beginning and no end. Individuals begin speaking in response to directions or questions asked before videotaping begins, and the majority either speak English with great difficulty or require translators. Where several speak at the same time, a good deal of babble is introduced, and considerable patience and perseverance is required to understand the narration. Camera work is often deficient, focusing overlong on individuals who are not speaking. In addition there are no visual aids to help identify geographical locations, nor is their [sic] printed material to help in making the fullest use of the audio presentation. Finally, there is no summation and no conclusion drawn.<sup>125</sup>

Others were more appreciative of “the value of using ‘real people’ ...in dealing with current social issues,” even if the presentation was not as sophisticated as some of the film productions used in family planning promotion.<sup>126</sup>

The programs were not completely unmediated, despite appearances, as the boxes of original footage and edited transcripts and tapes in the archives attest. Correspondence relating to the IPPF-funded program recorded in Bogota, Colombia in 1971, for example, suggests some of the political issues behind the scenes that framed the final version shown on television screens. A representative of the local family planning organization Profamilia noted that several women in the program mentioned the positive role of the United States and expressed their gratitude. She advised, however that this relationship “shouldn’t be mentioned as you know it is one of the arms they have against Family planning, that the U.S. want to abolish the under-developed countries.” The letter-writer also cautioned against including the

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<sup>125</sup> June 15, (1982): 1205.

<sup>126</sup> Review of “Parents and Children who have Adopted Each Other,” *Library Journal* September 1, (1982): 1627.

group's negative comments on the church's stance and the lack of government help.<sup>127</sup>

Although informal reports of audience support for her work were sometimes included in funding applications and program proposals, Stuart did not undertake any systematic investigations into the impact of her shows. Her archives do provide a glimpse into the power of the process itself to set off a chain of reactions among the local community, however. During the Bogota project, for example, the floor director walked off the job, apparently because he was "afraid" of the subject of vasectomy, while the program director decided to undergo the procedure himself! The public relations contact was also mobilized by the production process and decided to get fitted with an IUD.<sup>128</sup> Stuart's work clearly had the potential to spread information about family planning, while at the same time gathering information on local attitudes. The process of motivation was not didactically built in to the media, but might occur spontaneously through the conversations of participants and viewers as they discussed differing opinions on the pros and cons of contraception and small families—a classic example of the diffusion of innovations model but with a new twist, the participation of the intended audience.

## **Conclusion**

Although Americans began their international expansion work with high hopes, exporting family planning messages in the media proved challenging. Some of the difficulties stemmed from the lack of infrastructure, such as the absence of

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<sup>127</sup> Profamilia to Martha Stuart, 6 Sept 1971, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 6, Folder "IPPF Bogota Tapes.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

existing media networks and difficulties transporting materials to every region they were needed. Other problems arose in translation, with strategies devised for one region proving less appealing to audiences in another. Communications scholars involved in family planning began to acknowledge the various limitations of the mass media. Films could become quickly outdated. By itself, media was often useless, or even damaging. A family planning storyline could not possibly address the full range of questions or concerns that might arise in each particular local context, meaning that a trained professional needed to follow-up with a discussion to explain confusing or misconstrued elements of the story, address rumors about side-effects, or direct people to local services.<sup>129</sup>

Concerns about the ability of audiences to interpret media messages also appear to have had a stifling effect on the creativity of family planning promoters, leading to a limited range of narratives and approaches evident in the films of the time. The IPPF complained, in fact, of the conservative use of film techniques which differed little from those of twenty-five years before. In their opinion the problem with many family planning films was not that they quickly become dated, but that “they are already dated” when first produced.<sup>130</sup> If repeated exposure did improve audiences’ familiarity with media technologies and narrative strategies, it is likely that simplistic films rapidly became unappealing as viewer sophistication increased.

Moreover, the whole project of promoting family planning faced criticism from conservative groups in the United States as well as feminists around the world. If campaigning for domestic programs could stir charges of genocidal intentions

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<sup>129</sup> “Family Planning Programs,” 500.

<sup>130</sup> IPPF untitled document, Martha Stuart Papers, Box 6, Folder “IPPF Bogota Tapes,” p. 12.

towards America's minorities, then interfering in the birthrate of other nations could be interpreted as an equally sinister white plot to dominate people of color in poorer countries. Family planning promoters began to reevaluate of the appropriate use of media in light of these developments. Their enthusiasm for a more participatory and less hierarchical use of media shaped not only the content of family planning productions but also their form, leading to greater use of folk media and video. The idea of motivation had not been wholly abandoned, but it was now understood as something that should be undertaken locally, with the involvement of indigenous communities.<sup>131</sup>

In 1984, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities held its conference follow-up to the Bucharest meeting ten years earlier. In response to growing right-wing pressure within the United States to limit family planning funding, a representative of the Reagan administration announced that USAID funds would no longer be granted to any organization providing abortion services or giving clients information on abortion. The requirement limited access to other reproductive health services, as organizations struggled to separate out such activities from their other work, or prove that they could do so. The policy became known in the aid community as the "global gag rule" for its restrictions on free speech and public debate related to family planning. Countries that had partnered with American media producers to promote family planning in the 1960s and seventies became increasingly dependent upon their own resources in response to these constraints. The growing support for indigenous cultural production, as well as the collapse of U.S. funding for

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<sup>131</sup> As a 1981 overview of films authored by the Population Information Program (one of the largest producers of such films) acknowledged, motivational films "usually need to be made locally." "Family Planning Programs," 494.

international family planning, set the stage for the next major media development I take up in chapter five—Mexico's experiments with the idea of entertainment-education and the television soap opera.

## Chapter 5: Soap Opera as Soap Box: Family Planning and the Telenovela

*Miguel Sabido: “You’ve coined beautiful phrases – the medium is the message, etc., but please tell me how we can apply them...”*

*Marshall McLuhan: “I do not know and I do not care. I am only a theoretician of communication.”*

*Sabido: “What good are your theories if you don’t know how to apply them for the good of humanity?”*

Recollections of Miguel Sabido, International Communication Division  
Conference, Mexico City, 1974<sup>1</sup>

In the years after this purported exchange with the giant of North American communications theory, theatre director and television producer Miguel Sabido became famous for his prosocial (for positive social impact) model of persuasive media communication in entertainment television. As the previous chapters have shown, family planning promoters had long been interested in the possibility of transferring their messaging from educational sources to mass entertainment to maximize audiences and potential impact. Internationally, there had been numerous efforts in the postwar period to use commercial venues, from television networks in Brazil to cinemas across India, Thailand, and the Philippines.<sup>2</sup> Overall, however, even

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<sup>1</sup> Sabido quoted by Arvind Singhal and Rafael Obregon, “Social Uses of Commercial Soap Operas,” *Journal of Development Communication* 10, no. 1 (1999): 71.

<sup>2</sup> There were at least two full-length commercial entertainment family planning films made in this period that were widely shown in movie theaters in the Philippines and Thailand. *Batingaw (The Bell*,

the most entertaining productions were usually shown in venues used for education and discussion, such as village meetings. In large part this reflected the rural emphasis of family planning promotion and the lack of commercial entertainment media infrastructure in such areas.<sup>3</sup>

Sabido began experimenting with the use of the *telenovela* (or soap opera) in the 1970s to disseminate educational messages on a variety of topics, including family planning. His approach, which became known in communications circles as the entertainment-education strategy, proved massively successful and was widely imitated around the world.<sup>4</sup> The technique became as influential in health communication as the model of the diffusion of innovations had been in the previous decades.

The launch of the influential *telenovela* is surprising because it occurred within just a few years of the Mexican government's shift from a decades-old pronatalist policy under which access to contraception had been heavily restricted. Thanks to a national effort with this media strategy at its heart, between 1977 and 1986 the country saw a 34 percent decline in the pace of population growth.<sup>5</sup> The

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1974) was seen by over 800,000 theater-goers and broadcast on television to an audience of approximately one million. *Patesumpan Untarai* (*Dangerous Relations*, date unknown) apparently attracted large audiences to theaters, where condoms were distributed. The tickets also entitled holders to half-price vasectomies. "Family Planning Programs," *Population Reports* J, no. 23 (January-February 1981), 501.

<sup>3</sup> The exception was India, where a high volume of films were produced and distributed through the thriving domestic filmmaking network. Even there, however, rural populations saw family planning films only about once every three years as mobile vans traveled from region to region. The country's 7000 cinemas amounted to only one per 100,000 people. *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Other terms for the use of entertainment to deliver educational messages include edutainment and infotainment, although neither implies the full spectrum of research and evaluation that goes into an entertainment-education initiative based on the Sabido method. Both terms are also sometimes used derisively, to critique educational cultural programs perceived as "dumbing down" their intellectual content to better appeal to target audiences.

<sup>5</sup> William N. Ryerson, "History of Entertainment-Education," (unpublished paper, 1 June 1999), 2. Although historians cite a range of other factors to explain the downward trend in Mexico's birth rate,

United Nations Fund for Population Activities held its follow-up to the Bucharest meeting in Mexico City in 1984 in recognition of the country's dramatic shift from a birth rate of 7.7 children per woman in the early 1970s to 3.6 a decade later.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter I describe Mexico's rapid transition from a country where contraceptive use was largely prohibited to an exemplar of modern family planning promotion, and the legacy of the Mexican approach for media communications for health.

### **The Hidden History of Birth Control in Mexico**

Mexican birth control advocates had begun discussing the subject with their American counterparts early in the twentieth century, but they faced significant opposition from the government and the Catholic Church to the idea of introducing services to the country. A translated pamphlet originally written by Margaret Sanger, "The Regulation of Natality or the Standard of the Home: Safe and Scientific Methods to Avoid Conception," began circulating in the country in 1922, launching a "propaganda campaign" by Mexican birth control advocates that had little effect.<sup>7</sup>

Public health campaigning on other topics had been actively undertaken in Mexico since at least the late nineteenth century, so there was certainly no shortage of strategies for communicating health-related issues (including sexual topics) to the general public.<sup>8</sup> Because of low levels of literacy, a wide variety of tools had been

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the population movement and health communication specialists credit the campaign with the dramatic shift in this timeframe.

<sup>6</sup> Katherine Elaine Bliss, "La Salud Reproductiva en México, 1928-1975: La Influencia Internacional en la Política Doméstica," (unpublished paper, 13 April 2006), 1.

<sup>7</sup> See Sarah Buck, "Activists and Mothers: Feminist and Maternalist Politics in Mexico, 1923-1953," (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2002), 233-8.

<sup>8</sup> Katherine Elaine Bliss, "Between Risk and Confession: State and Popular Perspectives of Syphilis Infection in Revolutionary Mexico," in *Disease in the History of Modern Latin America: From*



used, including public talks, exhibitions, and film.<sup>9</sup> As health promotion efforts intensified in the first half of the twentieth century, campaigners (including representatives of American organizations and Mexican eugenicists) employed all available media avenues.<sup>10</sup>

The instigators, like their American counterparts, understood the influential role public discussion could play in the destigmatization of private subjects. Echoing the call for the “repeal of reticence” discussed in chapter one, the Mexican Public Health Department’s Propaganda and Education Section, for example, targeted “secrecy” in campaigns against syphilis and prostitution with the slogan “Syphilis is not a secret disease. If you do not confess your affliction it will appear in your children.”<sup>11</sup> Eugenicists and feminists also lobbied (unsuccessfully) for mandatory sex education in schools, as historian Alexandra Minna Stern has noted, on the

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*Malaria to AIDS*, ed. Diego Armus (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003); “The Science of Redemption: Syphilis, Sexual Promiscuity and Reformism in Revolutionary Mexico City,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 (1999) and *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002). Many early public health campaigns focused heavily on the health of children, reflecting the era’s pronatalism and their status as a symbol of Mexico’s potential for growth and development. Patience A. Schell, “Nationalizing Children through Schools and Hygiene: Porfirian and Revolutionary Mexico City,” *The Americas* 60, no. 4 (2004): 559–587.

<sup>9</sup> Public health campaigning became of keen interest to the government towards the end of the century as a means to prevent the spread of infectious disease and to modernize the nation. See Claudia Agostoni, *Monuments of Progress: Modernization and Public Health in Mexico City, 1876–1910* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003) and “Popular Health Education and Propaganda in Times of Peace and War in Mexico City, 1890s–1920s,” *American Journal of Public Health* 96 (2006).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Anne-Emanuelle Birn, “Revolution, the Scatological Way: The Rockefeller Foundation’s Hookworm Campaign in 1920s Mexico,” in *Disease in the History of Modern Latin America: From Malaria to AIDS*, ed. Diego Armus (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) and *Marriage of Convenience: Rockefeller International Health and Revolutionary Mexico* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006). In the 1930s, Mexican eugenicists turned to the radio airwaves to deliver lectures to the general public on topics such as “Physical Culture and Eugenics” and “Prenatal Advice.” Alexandra Minna Stern, “Responsible Mothers and Normal Children: Eugenics, Nationalism, and Welfare in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1920–1940,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12, no. 4 (1999): 369–397, 376. For a fuller account of the history of eugenics in Mexico, see Nancy Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Stern, “Responsible Mothers and Normal Children,” 376. See also Bliss, “Between Risk and Confession” and “The Science of Redemption.”

grounds that “sex and all it symbolized needed to be publicized and sexual anatomy itself... [had to] come under the public domain.”<sup>12</sup>

As Stern concludes, motherhood, childhood, and sexuality, which had once fallen under a private, patriarchal sphere, was gradually taken over by a medicalizing and paternal state in the course of post-revolutionary, pronatalist nation-building.<sup>13</sup> The enormous death toll of the revolution, as well as rising emigration, created population concerns among the country’s leaders. This anxiety reinforced earlier, nationalistic goals of growth and led to the first Population Law of 1936, which encouraged large families.<sup>14</sup> Under legislation known as the Sanitary Code, the provision of contraception was prohibited without medical prescription, the manufacture of contraceptives was restricted, and their advertising was banned.

In 1937, Hazel Moore of Sanger’s Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau visited the minority of supportive officials and private physicians in Mexico City. Reporting back, she noted that her contacts feared public resistance, especially to the idea that the government or outsiders were involved in trying to control fertility.<sup>15</sup> At the time, childbearing was valorized as the most significant social contribution a woman could make to the development of the country.<sup>16</sup> The glory of motherhood,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 387.

<sup>14</sup> Between 1910 and 1920 Mexico lost more than five percent of its population due to the revolutionary violence, epidemics (including the influenza pandemic of 1918), and migration to America, declining from 15,160,000 to 14,355,000. Poor sanitation also fueled a high child mortality rate of more than twenty percent. Stern, “Responsible Mothers and Normal Children,” 370. For an overview of the history of family planning in Mexico see Carlos Brambila, “Mexico’s Population Policy and Demographic Dynamics: The Record of Three Decades,” in *Do Population Policies Matter? Fertility and Politics in Egypt, India, Kenya, and Mexico*, ed. Anrudh Jain (New York, New York: Population Council, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Bliss, “La Salud Reproductiva en México,” 11.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Kay Vaughan, “Modernizing Patriarchy: State Policies, Rural Households and Women in Mexico, 1930-1940, in Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux, eds., *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000). Women’s

central to representations of national progress, was promoted in a wide range of media, from newspaper campaigns to celebrate Mother's Day to popular film programs subsidized by the state to maximize audience attendance. As in American cinema, where melodramatic narratives punished female characters who did not conform to a narrow range of gender roles, on the big screen in Mexico the happiness of women was directly related to their success in marriage and motherhood.<sup>17</sup>

In the period from 1940-1970 the country's population of 20 million more than doubled. This coincided with significant economic growth that was so pronounced it became known as the Mexican Miracle. For the country's leaders, population expansion was therefore associated with prosperity and national expansion. Combined with the celebration of childrearing as the apex of female accomplishment and the Church's opposition to contraception, pronatalist policies circumvented family planning programs for decades. Only in the late 1950s, when economic gains began to decline and evidence of the strain on society of declining mortality mounted, did the possibility of national family planning emerge.<sup>18</sup>

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appropriation of "maternalism" (as described by Seth Koven and Sonya Michel) to argue for women's special suitability for roles in public life involving the welfare of families and children, and the transnational influence of Republican Motherhood has been studied by several historians of Mexico. See Koven and Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1993); Sarah Buck, "The Meaning of Women's Vote in Mexico, 1917-1953," in *The Women's Revolution in Mexico, 1910-1953*, ed. Stephanie Mitchell and Patience A. Schell (New York, New York: Rowman Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007); Jocelyn Olcott, "Worthy Wives and Mothers: State-Sponsored Organizing in Post-Revolutionary Mexico," *Journal of Women's History* 13 (2002). For an overview of the history of motherhood in Mexico, see Nichole Sanders, "Mothering Mexico: The Historiography of Mothers and Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Mexico," *History Compass* 7 (2009).

<sup>17</sup> Buck, "Activists and Mothers," 265-305.

<sup>18</sup> John W. Sherman, "The 'Mexican Miracle' and its Collapse," in Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley, eds., *The Oxford History of Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Sherman points out that the Green Revolution, the transformation of agricultural practices that revolutionized and increased global food production, (and which was promoted by many of the same communications specialists who later focused on family planning communications), impoverished many rural Mexicans as improved processes required less labor. 591.

Rising levels of poverty, coupled with high birth rates across Latin America, made the region a central focus of the first International Planned Parenthood Conference held in Bombay (now Mumbai), in 1952. Demographers estimated that Mexico's population could grow to anywhere from 200 to 800 million people by the year 2000.<sup>19</sup> These dire projections won over some physicians and members of the government, although none would concede it publicly. Instead, some private clinics began offering contraception to the small numbers of elite women who could afford such services.<sup>20</sup> In 1958, American physician Dr. Edris Rice-Wray founded the *Asociación pro-Bienestar de la Familia Mexicana* (the Family Well-being Association) in Mexico City, the first family planning clinic in the country. Antipathy toward the idea that the United States might be funding population control programs restricted Planned Parenthood from establishing facilities under its own name, although the organization was in regular contact with Rice-Wray and other supporters in the area.<sup>21</sup>

Private clinics operated discreetly and, in accordance with Mexican law prohibiting "propaganda for contraception," did not publicize their activities, spreading news of their services by word of mouth rather than in press releases or media campaigns.<sup>22</sup> When the IPPF described Dr. Rice-Wray's work in its 1959

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<sup>19</sup> Bliss, "La Salud Reproductiva en México," 3.

<sup>20</sup> Gabriela Soto Laveaga, "'Let's Become Fewer': Soap Operas, Contraception, and Nationalizing the Mexican Family in an Overpopulated World," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 4, no. 3 (2007): 23.

<sup>21</sup> See PPFA II, Box 206, Folder 6.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Dr. Arturo Aldama, 2 November 1962, Planned Parenthood Federation of America Papers II, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College (hereafter PPFA II), Box 206, Folder 6, Asociación Pro-Salud Maternal (Rice-Wray). The reticence surrounding the topic appears to have been so pronounced that Mexico's integral role in the development of the norethindrone, a synthetic estrogen-related compound that was used in the development of the contraceptive pill, went largely uncelebrated for decades. Norethindrone was synthesized by Mexican chemist Luis E. Miramontes, in 1951, while

newsletter, she wrote an angry response to the organization emphasizing the need for secrecy.

I thought I made it clear that we must have no publicity whatsoever and that we didn't even want anything to come out in the news about us until we get much stronger. Perhaps it is difficult for others in other countries to understand how precarious our position is here in Mexico. The church is very strong and ruthless. They would go to any lengths to destroy us if they knew we existed.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, her clinic was closed down by the government in 1961, although it reopened a year later. By 1965 she had moved locations and begun operating as the *Centro de Investigaciones de la Fisiología de la Mujer: Asociación pro-Salud Maternal* (Center for the Investigation of Female Physiology: Maternal Health Association), a name that tapped into the culture's celebration of motherhood as a cover for family planning services.

Attitudes towards birth control began to shift in the region in the mid-1960s, as the IPPF organized meetings with like-minded colleagues and promoted press coverage of the population explosion issue, although supporters in the region were at first more concerned with the high rates of illegal abortion. This in itself was something of a taboo subject until Chile first published its data in a 1962 report, which found that between 1938 and 1960 the number of abortion cases had more than tripled.<sup>24</sup> Other countries soon followed suit with their own studies of the scale of the problem.

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he was working at a Syntex laboratory under the direction of American researcher Carl Djerassi. For a full account of the development of the pill see Lara V. Marks, *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Bliss, "La Salud Reproductiva en México," 15.

<sup>24</sup> The report stated that approximately 20 cases of abortion complications were admitted for every 100 live hospital births. J. Mayone Stycos, "Survey Research and Population Control in Latin America," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1964): 371.

In 1963 the IPPF declared that one of their goals for the region was to explore the possibility “of using press publicity on family planning programs to develop informed public opinion favorable to family planning.”<sup>25</sup> The organization began broadly distributing articles, sending copies of four essays to 170 Latin American newspapers. In response to their efforts to generate coverage of the issue, *Readers Digest* magazine published on the topic in its Spanish and English editions, and in a major breakthrough, the Catholic Encyclopedia planned to include a discussion of abortion in its new edition.<sup>26</sup> In 1964, the IPPF held its fourth Western Hemisphere Region conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, attended by representatives from twenty Latin American countries. Although few expressed concerns about population issues, government leaders, church officials, and physicians conveyed great dismay over the rates and dangers of illegal abortion. Within a year, they would also be talking about the perils of unchecked population growth.

The Spanish-language magazine *Visión*, widely circulated in South and Central America, reported on the San Juan conference in an article entitled “More People, More Problems.” The piece linked rapid population expansion to social and economic problems such as those in Brazil, where poor adults from rural communities looking for work were overwhelming city slums. In 1965, Colombia hosted the first Pan American Assembly on Population, where attendees signaled a change in thinking across the region and expressed a desire to launch family planning

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<sup>25</sup> Report to the Executive Committee of the IPPF, Western Hemisphere Region By Ofelia Mendoza, November 14, 1963, PPFA II, Box 204, Folder 16.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

efforts.<sup>27</sup> When the Pope confounded the expectations of the family planning movement and reaffirmed the Catholic Church's ban on artificial contraception in 1968, support for family planning only increased as religious leaders around the world struggled to reconcile the rule with the needs of their congregants.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the shifting climate, family planning promoters remained cautious. Some argued vehemently against waging persuasive media campaigns across Latin America, on the grounds that crossing the line between information and persuasion would be "the kiss of death" to any organization in this sensitive, Catholic context.<sup>29</sup> Yet without the imprimatur of a national campaign, little progress was made in Mexico, and by the beginning of the 1970s, the country's population had risen to almost 50 million.<sup>30</sup> Concerned about rising unemployment and worsening economic conditions for rural Mexicans, President Luis Echeverria reversed his previous pronatalist policy and announced family planning as a basic right.<sup>31</sup> In 1972 the government launched a national family planning program funded by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities. In December, a conference of eighty Mexican bishops issued a declaration implying the rights of families to make their own decisions on the issue, in defiance of the Vatican. The declaration advocated pastoral solutions to the practical problems that beset poor families and concluded that a

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<sup>27</sup> Beryl Suitters, *Be Brave and Angry: Chronicles of the IPPF* (London: IPPF, 1973), chap. 13, "Latin America and the Santiago Conference," 348-373.

<sup>28</sup> Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood And Its Clergy Alliances* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 119 .

<sup>29</sup> Donald J. Bogue, "Propaganda versus Information in Family Planning Programs," in *Mass Communication and Motivation for Birth Control*, ed. Donald J. Bogue (Chicago: Community and Family Study Center, 1967), 179.

<sup>30</sup> Soto Laveaga, "'Let's Become Fewer.'"

<sup>31</sup> Suitters, *Be Brave and Angry*, 383.

parent's important decision to have another child or not "implies the right and responsibility to decide upon the method."<sup>32</sup>

Studies conducted by CONAPO (Coordinación Nacional de Planificación Familiar), the national family planning council set up by the Mexican government to establish free clinic services, concluded that earlier efforts had failed to adequately disseminate information about contraception, no doubt due to the restrictions against publicity for family planning. Just as American health campaigners had increasingly turned to media professionals to devise effective communication strategies, the government invited members of the Mexican Association of Public Relations Firms and Media to the National Publicity Council to compete for the contract to develop a campaign. One of the winning efforts, "Vámonos Haciendo Menos" (Let's Become Less [or Fewer]), targeted macho behaviors and entreated men to control violent and impulsive tendencies, to show understanding, and to apply these new approaches to the role of fatherhood. Advertisements aimed at women discouraged passivity, previously a valued trait of traditional Mexican womanhood, and instead described a "true woman" as one who "intervenes, has opinions, decides, participates, contributes."<sup>33</sup> The campaigns emphasized that taking control of one's fertility was an important way to accomplish this. One advertisement went so far with the notion that a woman should decide that men complained stridently, leading the government to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>33</sup> The importance of female passivity in Mexican culture has been overemphasized by historians and recent scholarship has instead pointed to counter-examples of the representation of women and their political activities. See, for example, Joanne Herschfield, *Imagining La Chica Moderna: Women, Nation and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917-1936* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), which traces the image of the "modern woman," comparable to the American flapper, in Mexican media. On the long tradition of female activism see, for example, Kristina A. Boylan, "Gendering the Faith and Altering the Nation: Mexican Catholic Women's Activism, 1917-1940," in Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan and Gabriela Cano, eds., *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics and Power in Modern Mexico* (Durham: North Carolina Press, 2006).



follow in 1976 with an alternative message stressing family planning as a couple's choice.

Historian Gabriela Soto Laveaga judges the campaign's focus on stereotypes about Mexicans (macho men and passive women) to be a failure, concluding that while it did encourage new gender roles, the advertising also reinforced class and racial divisions.<sup>34</sup> Overall, the approach reflected the assumption, regularly decried as incorrect by family planning promoters, that people have many children because of "pervasive cultural and religious norms encouraging maximum child bearing, obsessive sexual patterns, and economic ideologies for the large family."<sup>35</sup> As the KAP (Knowledge, Attitude, Practice) studies had suggested, even within communities where large families were the norm, people were still interested in limiting their fertility providing they could do so without the opprobrium of religious or political leaders and friends and relatives.<sup>36</sup>

Soto Laveaga also notes that the campaign failed to address the negative role of social factors such as unemployment and violence and instead encouraged men and women to transform the gender system through their own behavior. These points echo the criticisms, laid out in the previous chapter, of the family planning community's lack of attention to the structural inequalities which create and maintain poverty in their narrow emphasis on family size. Yet considering these efforts in the context of

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<sup>34</sup> Soto Laveaga, "Let's Become Fewer."

<sup>35</sup> J. Mayone Stycos, "Survey Research and Population Control in Latin America," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1964): 368.

<sup>36</sup> Studies in traditional societies, such as indigenous descendents of Mayan and Aztec peoples in Latin America, have shown that contraceptive use rises when people can access their contraception from non-indigenous suppliers rather than a member of their own community, for example. Anne Terborgh, James E. Rosen, Roberto Santiso Galvez, Willy Terceros, Jane T. Bertrand and Sheana E. Bull, "Family Planning Among Indigenous Populations in Latin America," *International Family Planning Perspectives* 21, no. 4 (1995).

other international campaigns casts them in a more favorable light. In fact, the Mexican government's attempt to address gender inequalities at all represented some of the most progressive thinking of the 1970s and pointed toward a new vision for family planning communications that would come to dominate the field in the years after the end of the population control era.

### **Family Planning on the Small Screen**

Television was launched in Mexico in 1950 by entrepreneurs who had built their fortunes in radio broadcasting and the cinema industry. These leading figures in media then built up commercial television without any regulation by the Mexican government. By 1970, as stations competed for viewers and advertisers, the declining quality of television productions led to a public outcry.<sup>37</sup> President Echeverría, who objected to the sex and violence shown in imported American television shows, called for reform, resulting in the division of television stations equally between the public and private sectors and the proviso that private broadcasters provide socially relevant programming.<sup>38</sup> The *Televisa* station took control of the resulting private channels after several of the stations merged.<sup>39</sup> Miguel Sabido, vice-president for research at *Televisa*, was a key participant in the reform negotiations and a leading influence in the search for a more socially-useful application for television.

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<sup>37</sup> Heidi Noel Nariman, *Soap Operas for Social Change: Toward a Methodology for Entertainment-Education Television* (Westport, CT: Praeger: 1993), 9.

<sup>38</sup> Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers, in *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), 51.

<sup>39</sup> Nariman, *Soap Operas for Social Change*, 10.

Sabido proposed the idea of a prosocial *telenovela*. *Telenovelas*, while similar to the soap opera format that flourished on the radio in the United States in the 1930s and 40s (like the Latin American *radionovelas* of the same era), exhibit a number of key differences that were important factors in the success of Sabido's work.<sup>40</sup> The programs do not run continuously as long as audiences will tune in, but instead are made up of a finite set of half-hour episodes, spanning various allotments of time from three months to one year, like a mini-series. This gives the format considerable flexibility to tackle new issues with each different broadcast. The genre includes historical narratives, supernatural and science fiction tales, and most commonly, romantic and family relationships in everyday life. The programs constitute Mexico's most popular television format, and several are shown every weeknight in the primetime hours of 5 to 8pm and 9 to 10pm. Of the various *telenovelas* broadcast during a particular period, while one is winding to a close, others will be building up from their early episodes, attracting viewers who will continue watching when the series they first tuned in for comes to an end. Mexican audiences (both men and women, and sometimes children) are thus likely to follow several different shows at the same time.

Sabido had studied theatre at the National Autonomous University in Mexico, where his teacher encouraged him to approach directing from a theoretical perspective drawing on the fundamentals of genres from comedy to tragedy. He continued this approach at *Televisa*, where in 1974 he founded a research institute (IMEC, Instituto Mexicano de Estudios de la Comunicación or the Mexican Institute

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<sup>40</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all information on the *telenovela* and Sabido's use of it is from Nariman, *Soap Operas for Social Change*, chap. 1, "Formulation of the Entertainment-Education Strategy for Development Communication in Mexico."

for the Study of Communication) to investigate the educational uses of television. Sabido drew on communications research from the United States but was disappointed in the consensus there over the “limited effects” model. Although numerous studies posited television’s *negative* effects (especially the impact of violent scenes on children), those investigating the *benefits* of the medium generally concluded that audiences selectively absorb only those messages which confirm their existing beliefs.

This pessimism has long frustrated those in the field who perceive strong negative effects in popular culture. Despite ongoing concerns over its deleterious effects on everything from women’s body image to young people’s propensity for binge drinking and violence, few have taken seriously the idea that entertainment can promote *valuable* social messages. Perhaps because of their low opinion of the quality of popular media, many are apparently skeptical of its positive persuasive power.<sup>41</sup> The issue echoes a common refrain among communications researchers that critics appreciated the influence of consumer and pharmaceutical advertising but had little faith in other uses of media persuasion to “sell” ideas or healthy behaviors. As two of the leading scholars of the entertainment-education approach argue, “[i]t is ridiculous to say that television can persuade us to drink Coca Cola, and the next minute, through a soap opera, it cannot teach us.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Of course critiques of popular or “lowbrow” culture are extensive and encompass a wide range of theoretical and political standpoints, from class and gender based prejudices against crude or trivial entertainment to Marxist analyses of its oppressive social function in suppressing dissent. The classic account of the emergence of the high/low divide is Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> Arvind Singhal and Rafael Obregon, “Social Uses of Commercial Soap Operas,” *Journal of Development Communication* 10, no. 1 (1999): 74. Pharmaceutical companies have had no such qualms about financing extensive media campaigns to stimulate demand for their medications: direct-to-consumer advertising began in the United States in 1981. See Francis B. Palumbo and C. Daniel

Sabido had an optimistic assessment of the possible uses of television, having produced a series of popular historical soap operas in the late 1960s which generated interest among viewers in Mexican history and culture. Around the same time, a Peruvian series, *Simplemente María* (Simply Mary), also illustrated the influential power of the telenovela format.<sup>43</sup> The storyline follows María, a poor migrant to Lima who is treated badly by her rich employers and seduced and then abandoned by a wealthy man, leaving her unemployed and raising a child alone. By learning to read and taking sewing lessons, she begins to build a new life for herself, eventually making her fortune as a fashion designer thanks to her skills with a Singer sewing machine. After twenty years, she and her literacy teacher admit their love for one another and the two are married. The series attracted extremely high numbers of viewers and had a measurable impact on viewers' behavior, increasing sales for sewing machines and demand for literacy classes. It was also a major commercial success, generating \$20 million in profit by 1977, and has since been remade at least four times. At the close of the twentieth century *Simplemente María* was still known as the most popular *telenovela* ever broadcast in Latin America. The show was also exported to the United States for Hispanic audiences and dubbed into various languages for international distribution. Its impact elsewhere has also been significant. In 1994, for example, the show earned the highest audience ratings ever achieved in Russia.

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Mullins, "The Development of Direct-to-Consumer Prescription Drug Advertising Regulation," *Food and Drug Law Journal* 57, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>43</sup> There was no formal evaluation of the series undertaken at the time but communications scholars have since reconstructed the history of the program and its impact, interviewing viewers who still remembered important plot details and could sing the theme song twenty-five years after the broadcast. For a full account, which I draw on here unless otherwise cited, see Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers, *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), chap. 2.

IMEC studied *Simplemente María* as well as a variety of television formats, including news broadcasting and game shows. Sabido's first prosocial soap opera, which established his theoretical model, incorporated many of the same elements that had helped to make the Peruvian *telenovela* so successful.<sup>44</sup> Some of these factors mirror emerging trends in family planning communications, such as the focus on indigenous production (most other *telenovelas* shown in Peru were developed in Mexico or Brazil), and the use of a rapidly expanding media infrastructure—television ownership was increasing dramatically in this period.<sup>45</sup> From its conception, *Simplemente María* was intended for wide distribution, so no particular references were made to Peru as the location of the story (in fact, the series was originally adapted from an Argentinean program of the same name), and careful editing was used to create scenes that could represent any major city across the region. The appeal of the program across Latin America was enhanced by the inclusion of celebrities from other countries, including Mexico, Colombia, and Puerto Rico, as well as well-respected Peruvian actors. Sabido would adopt many of these techniques in his own work.

Sabido cited Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura, proponent of social learning theory (the idea that people learn by observing and modeling the behavior of

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<sup>44</sup> Communications scholars also point to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio series *The Lawsons* (1944) which became *Blue Hills* in 1949, and the British Broadcasting Corporation radio soap opera, *The Archers*, which began in 1951 and is still on the air today, as the earliest well-known examples of the entertainment-education approach, although none of these were developed with the input of communications scholars. The programs were designed to educate farming communities about agricultural innovations. Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel Sabido, eds., *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 12, n.8.

<sup>45</sup> During the series, the *telenovela* was also remade as a radio show and two-hour film, using the same actors. This extended the reach of the television series into the larger number of radio owners and attracted new viewers, many of whom watched in groups at stores or other locations where television were communally available.

others) as a key influence on his theoretical approach. Reading Bandura, he said, helped him to appreciate that people could learn from the lives of media characters. The *telenovela* format provided viewers with role models, both positive and negative, who illustrated how certain behavior led to good outcomes.<sup>46</sup> The melodramatic storyline, “a mediation between good and bad,” allowed writers to link particular behaviors to major consequences, in the same manner that the “pictures with a purpose” described in chapter two illustrated the benefits or risks of pursuing a particular path. He also sought to create characters with universal appeal, drawing on Carl Jung’s theory of universally familiar archetypes.<sup>47</sup> The Cinderella story of *Simplemente María* had drawn on the image of the self-made woman who achieved success through hard work, self-reliance, and a heroic struggle against oppressive forces. Sabido’s telenovelas included characters with similarly recognizable characteristics.

The format also capitalized on the audience’s interest in the lives of others. Sabido understood that audiences did not watch shows just to know the resolution of the story. Indeed, as most *telenovelas* (like all soap operas), revolve around the same few narrative ideas, viewers can quite easily predict the final outcome. However, despite knowing how the story might play out, audiences enjoyed participating in the

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<sup>46</sup> Bandura argued that humans can learn social behaviors from model examples who are rewarded for their actions. Singhal and Obregon, “Social Uses of Commercial Soap Operas,” 70. Later in his work Sabido also cited Eric Bentley’s dramatic theory, which laid out the components of melodrama and how they could be used to impact audiences, and neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean’s triune brain theory, which identified three ways human beings process messages through intelligence, emotion, and sexual urges, as influential. He also developed his own theory of tones to describe the different emotions that performance styles could generate.

<sup>47</sup> Singhal and Obregon, “Social Uses of Commercial Soap Operas,” 73. For Sabido’s own account of the theoretical basis for his approach, see his chapter “The Origins of Entertainment-Education,” in Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel Sabido, eds., *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

emotional ups and downs of the narrative, speculating and commenting on the plot as it went along. Sabido described this as a fascination with “gossip” and suggested it was part of human nature, rather than linking it specifically to women in the derisive manner it is often used. By provoking discussion among viewers about the dilemmas of the characters, Sabido believed, the soap opera “creates a climate for social change.”<sup>48</sup>

To reconcile the fact that media messages will have the most impact on only a small group of viewers with his sense that *telenovelas* could have a broad impact, he employed the theory of the two-step-flow of communication laid out by sociologists Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Hazel Gaudet, and Bernard Berelson (who later became such an important figure in family planning communication).<sup>49</sup> In this model, the small group of viewers who have absorbed the media message will then communicate that idea to others, further diffusing its reach. Most significantly, this understanding fused the potential power of media with the more persuasive function of interpersonal communication, bringing together both the media and the outreach elements of the diffusion of innovations model of international family planning campaigns described in the previous chapter. The key difference here was the role of viewers rather than trained fieldworkers in the outreach effort, creating a model of peer education.

Between 1975 and 1982, Sabido developed six television soap operas for *Televisa* based on his entertainment-education strategy. His first, *Ven Conmigo* (Come With Me), was inspired by the literacy campaigns generated by *Simplemente María* and was intended to encourage illiterate adults to study and motivate literate

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<sup>48</sup> Singhal and Obregon, “Social Uses of Commercial Soap Operas,” 69.

<sup>49</sup> *The People’s Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), cited in Heidi Noel Nariman, *Soap Operas for Social Change*, 33.



adults to teach others.<sup>50</sup> He hired Celia Alcántara, the writer of the original Argentinean series that had inspired *Simplemente María*, to develop the script. The programs first attempted to teach adults to read and write, but the didactic focus apparently dulled the entertainment value. The production team (which included Sabido's sister, Irene, a teacher and television producer at *Televisa*), shifted their approach to encourage people to enroll in a national adult education program, presenting the idea that life is a school and that people can always learn. This storyline was deeply interwoven with the various romantic plots typical of the genre. The revamped series gradually increased in popularity until it had exceeded the ratings of other *telenovelas* broadcast by *Televisa*. Enrollments in adult literacy classes were nine times higher the year the show was broadcast than they had been the previous year.

Sabido's next series, about family planning, was shown five nights a week for eight months, from August 1977 to April 1978. Because large families had been encouraged in Mexico by the Church and the government for decades, the series needed to do more than simply inform viewers of the availability of family planning. Just as the international family planning movement had moved from information to motivation, so Sabido attempted to *inspire* audiences to use contraception. The three main goals were to inform couples about family planning methods and the

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<sup>50</sup> Unless otherwise cited, all information on *Ven Conmigo* comes from chaps. 2 and 3 in Singhal and Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*.

government clinics where they were available, to motivate people to use family planning, and to induce those who already did to encourage others to do so.<sup>51</sup>

*Acompáñame* (Come Along With Me) also promoted the equal status of women and the importance of improving communication between husbands and wives, addressing elements of gender inequality that could stand in the way of a woman's ability to access contraception. The storyline follows three sisters and the impact of their different reproductive experiences on their lives. Esperanza has over ten children and faces an unwanted pregnancy, while Amanda uses birth control to plan her family. Martha, already overwhelmed with caring for three young children, is relieved to discover she is not pregnant again and decides, with her husband, to begin using contraception. Mirroring the messaging of the "Let's Become Fewer" campaigns, both Esperanza and Amanda have to become more involved in decisions about their children when Esperanza's formerly hardworking husband becomes a drunk because of the pressures of providing for such a large family, and Amanda's husband dies of cancer.<sup>52</sup>

Because the characters were deliberately so true-to-life, the degree to which audiences identified with them was very pronounced. In the case of *Simplemente María*, after Mary's daughter-in-law died in childbirth, several thousand Lima residents attended the taping of the funeral episode, wearing mourning clothes and grieving. Sales of flowers and Valium increased. Similarly, when Mary finally wed her loyal teacher, the church location for the filming was crowded with audience-

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<sup>51</sup> I have drawn extensively on two accounts for my discussion of Sabido's work in general and *Acompáñame* specifically Singhal and Rogers, *Entertainment-Education* and Nariman, *Soap Operas for Social Change*.

<sup>52</sup> Soto Laveaga makes this important connection in "'Let's Become Fewer,'" 27.

members who would only leave to allow the crew in after being promised they could give their wedding gifts and congratulate the (fictional) bride and groom after the ceremony. This “blending of fantasy and reality” became a key element of entertainment-education.<sup>53</sup>

The complete effect could not be achieved solely through the dramatic content of the program, however. Sabido also devised an epilogue, given by a celebrity at the end of each episode, to summarize that program’s content, relate it to the lives of viewers, and present an action that viewers could take in response to the motivation inspired by the program. Epilogues to *Ven Conmigo*, for example, provided the address of the Ministry of Education, where literacy booklets were available.<sup>54</sup>

Broadcast in 1975, *Acompáñame* had an immediate impact. A study of 800 adults living in Mexico City illustrated that viewers knew more about family planning methods than non-viewers and were likely to express a positive attitude towards the use of contraception. CONAPO received an average of 500 telephone enquiries a month during the series, and many callers mentioned the television soap opera as their reason for phoning. Twenty-five hundred women responded to an idea suggested in the show and registered as voluntary workers in the national family planning program. Contraceptive sales increased 23 percent in one year, compared to a seven percent increase the preceding year, and more than 560,000 women enrolled in family

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<sup>53</sup> Singhal and Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> 250,000 newly enrolled adult learners visited the address the day after it was broadcast, causing gridlock in Mexico City that lasted until midnight and exhausting supplies of the literacy booklets. After the series was sold on for broadcast in other countries, the same episode caused great confusion when shown in Lima where the address did not exist. Communications scholars cite these occurrences to stress the importance of building an infrastructure that can cope with the results of this highly effective formula.

planning clinics.<sup>55</sup> American family planning promoters were impressed. After visiting Mexico at the start of the series and again after it ended, David Poindexter, who had persuaded American broadcasters to integrate population messages in shows such as *Maude*, encouraged influential contacts including United States senators and the Director-General of the BBC to write to the president of *Televisa* in support of another entertainment-education soap opera.<sup>56</sup> Sabido went on to produce five more television series addressing family planning and other social issues for the network.<sup>57</sup>

## Ethical Issues

Recognizing the power of face-to-face communication but the reality of the lack of enough field staff, family planning promoters had long argued for “some means which will combine the intimacy of a home visit with the possible reach of a radio broadcast.”<sup>58</sup> Television could offer just such a combination, and the *telenovela* added the emotional impact of “affective” storytelling. By uniting educational goals with entertaining approaches, Sabido thus sought to communicate “emotively” as well as “cognitively,” echoing Martha Stuart’s ideas discussed in the previous chapter

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<sup>55</sup> The enrollment figures were an increase of 33 percent, compared to a one percent decrease the previous year. Population Media Center, “PMC Program Fundamentals – Sabido Method,” <http://www.populationmedia.org/programs/sabido.html>, (accessed 15 September 2007).

<sup>56</sup> Singhal et al, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*, 28.

<sup>57</sup> *Vamos Juntos* (When We Are Together), 1979-80, promoted responsible parenthood; *El Combate* (The Fight), 1980, on adult literacy; *Caminemos* (Let’s Walk Together), 1980-81, on sexual responsibility for teenagers; *Nosotras Las Mujeres* (We the Women), 1981, to promote equal status for women; and *Por Amor* (For Love), 1981-82, on family planning.

<sup>58</sup> Frank Kavanaugh, “The Present and Future Role of Television in Communicating Family Planning,” in *Communicating Family Planning: Speak, They Are Listening, Selected Readings* (East-West Communication Institute, n.d.), 32.

about the use of television to change not only what people think, but also what they feel and do.<sup>59</sup>

Once again, however, the strategy raised ethical concerns, especially given the unexpectedly strong effects generated in *Simplemente María* and its imitators. The deliberate blurring of fantasy and reality may create disappointment among viewers who cannot achieve the same results as the characters they identify with in their romantic relationships or careers. When television producers and networks want to extend a series purely for profit, educational or social goals can be quickly abandoned. Finally, codifying the strategy raises the possibility of its misuse of influence for negative ends.

In answer to questions regarding the ethics of entertainment-education, Sabido maintained that because the values he was communicating were consistent with Mexico's constitution and the documents of the United Nations that the country had signed on to (presumably the declaration of the UNFPA meetings of 1974 and '84), that his work was not simply promoting his ideas but those sanctioned for the country as a whole.<sup>60</sup> He used such documents as the moral framework for his approach, then constructed a "values grid" expressing the particular behaviors each series was supposed to encourage or discourage. For his work on family planning, Sabido asked Catholic Church leaders to help devise the grid. The resulting document served as a formal statement agreed upon by the religious community, the government, and the media team to guide the development of the *telenovela*, and it seems to have helped build consensus among those who might otherwise have objected to the series.

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<sup>59</sup> Nariman, *Soap Operas for Social Change*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Singhal and Obregon, "Social Uses of Commercial Soap Operas," 75.

Even so, some criticized Sabido's work for justifying the commercial excesses of *Televisa* and giving Mexico a bad reputation by showing poverty, familiar charges leveled at those who sought to use popular media for the promotion of family planning. There were also clear limitations to the approach that modified the enthusiasm of communications theorists. A small percentage of viewers who share the opinions of negative characters, for example, will identify with them rather than the positive role models depicted. Nicknamed the "Archie Bunker effect" after the racist character in Norman Lear's comedy *All in the Family* where communications experts first reported on the problem, this phenomenon means that viewers with strong prejudices might have their views reinforced rather than reformed.<sup>61</sup> Overall, however, the model's intended impact was far more pronounced.

### **Conclusion: Exporting Entertainment-Education**

The success of Sabido's approach inspired numerous other entertainment-education efforts around the world, the majority of which dealt with family planning. The first project was launched in India after numerous exchanges between American and Indian communications scholars and family planning advocates. In 1977, David Poindexter visited Sabido to learn about his methods. A few years later he met Inder K. Gujral, former Indian Minister of Information and Broadcasting, at a communications conference in Strasbourg France. After several trips to India instigated by Gujral and S. S. Gill, his successor, Poindexter and Sabido held various

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<sup>61</sup> Singhal et al, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*, 14.

workshops to teach the entertainment-education strategy to Indian media professionals. The resulting series, *Hum Log* (We People) was broadcast in 1984.<sup>62</sup>

Although the seventeen-month series eventually achieved an unprecedented 90 percent share of the viewing audience, early episodes were far less popular with viewers. Feedback from forty viewing clubs complained that the storyline, featuring the differing perspectives of three generations of a family, was developing too slowly, the messaging was heavy-handed, and poor acting and violent situations were spoiling the series. In response, writer Manohar Shyam Joshi spiced up the narrative with a sub-plot about corruption and broadened the family planning messages to address themes about the status of women, family harmony, cultural pluralism within the country and the importance of Indian heritage. The series promoted the idea that the different religious groups in India could co-exist and that the caste system was unfair, and posited a shared Indian identity in opposition to Western ways and values. In just one example of how audiences ignored or reworked the intended messages of the series according to their own beliefs, many viewers instead saw Indian identity as a mixture of Eastern and Western traditions.

About sixty million people tuned in to an average broadcast, the largest ever to watch a television program in India at the time. A survey of 1,170 adults reported that 96 percent of those who had watched at least one episode liked it, 94 percent said it was entertaining, and 83 percent said it was educational. Even in the south of the country, where fewer viewers watched because they did not speak the language of the broadcast (Hindi), an overwhelming majority of those interviewed expressed their

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<sup>62</sup> Unless otherwise cited, the information on *Hum Log* comes from chap. 4, “The *Hum Log* Story in India,” in Singhal and Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*.

enthusiasm for the series. The producers and actors received 400,000 letters. As with *Simplemente María*, thousands of viewers wrote in after seeing entertainment-education soap operas, often suggesting storylines and commenting on the script. In response to this investment made by audiences, writers have regularly incorporated their suggestions and given more screen time to the most popular characters.<sup>63</sup>

The success of *Hum Log* can be traced to some of the same factors that were critical to the reception of *Simplemente María* and *Acompáñame*, such as the harnessing of a growing media technology. During the duration of the series, the number of television sets in India doubled from 3.5 to 7 million and viewership rose from 37 to 60 million [figure 8]. Although melodramas were popular in India's flourishing film market, *Hum Log* was the first soap opera on national television. In the years following, the genre dominated entertainment in this medium. The series thus exploited the novelty of the format and in the process helped to establish it as a commercially successful genre.

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<sup>63</sup> Singhal and Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*, 38.



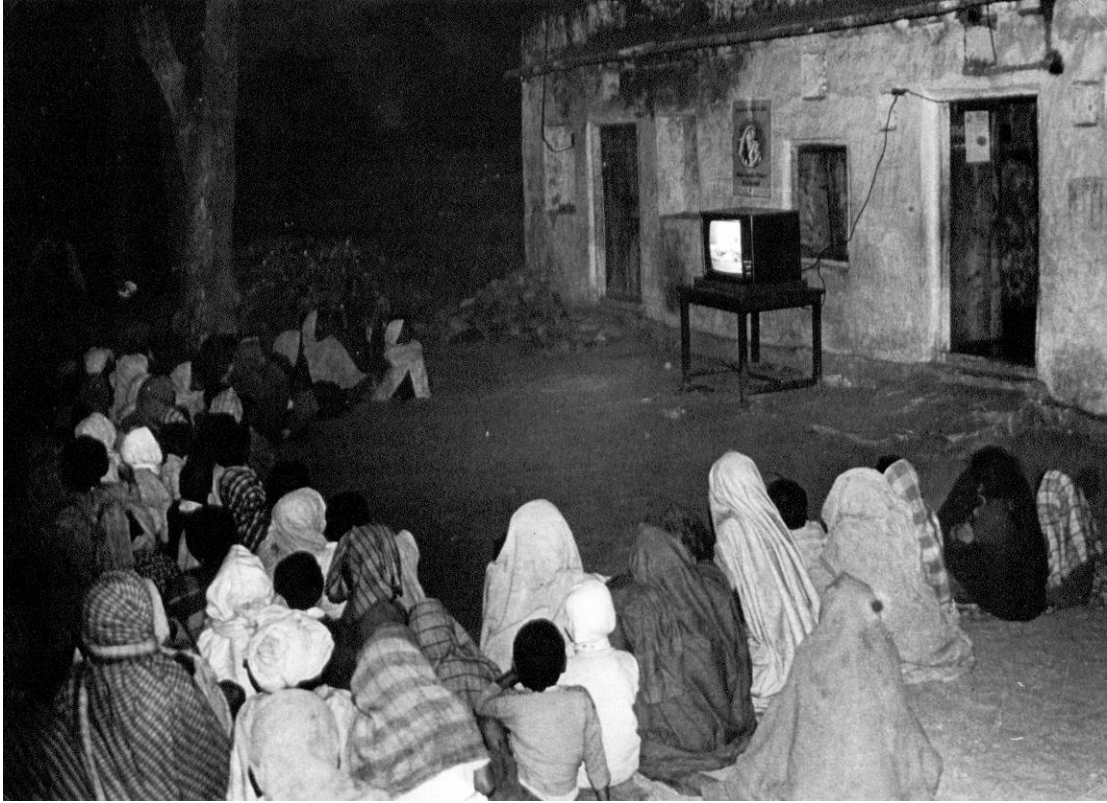


Figure 8. A rural community in India watches the television, n.d. The poster above the set appears to show an image of a woman and child, presumably advertizing family planning. Credit: WHO/UNESCO

By 2004, more than 200 entertainment-education initiatives had been developed worldwide, most addressing health issues in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and predominantly using the soap opera format for radio or television.<sup>64</sup> Miguel Sabido's *telenovelas*, and the vast array of entertainment-education productions that have followed, constitute a return to the strategies of a previous era in birth control promotion in America. Like the films of the early twentieth century described in chapter two, their messages were couched in melodramatic narratives

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<sup>64</sup> Singhal et al, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*, 7.

featuring villains and role models. The radio soap operas of the Second World War, the Disney cartoon, and the Yoruba folk drama thus share similarities with the “pictures with a purpose” of the early twentieth century, by blurring the lines between entertainment and education. But the *telenovela* reintroduced a key ingredient that had long been missing from such material. The success of the family planning *telenovela* may well reflect the genre’s particular suitability for the subject of contraception, given that the storylines center on sexual relationships and family life. As I explore in the concluding chapter, the use of entertainment media thus offered family planning promoters a means to reintroduce an important aspect long absent from their media efforts—sex.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

I began this study with a quote from Margaret Sanger's appearance at Boston's Ford Hall Forum in 1929, when she wore a gag to protest the silencing of the birth control movement and handed her speech to Harvard professor Arthur M. Schlesinger to read on her behalf. By the end of the period under review here, the United States government had instituted the "global gag rule" which banned funding for activities connected in any way with abortion information or services. In the years between the two events, advocates for access to contraception used the tools of mass media to challenge the silencing of the subject and to transform it from a private concern to a public issue. Film, radio, and television were not supplementary elements but instead served as crucial components of this process. Integrating media into the scholarship on the birth control movement thus addresses an important but overlooked element of this history. Broadcasting family planning publicized the topic and, critically, helped to convey acceptability. Ironically, the struggles to air these messages on the big and small screens and over the airwaves ensured that each success suggested a shift in the boundaries of acceptability in favor of contraception.

As I demonstrate in chapter two, from the very earliest days of the movement, Sanger and her supporters courted media attention, using the cinema to raise the public profile they had already created through the press, lectures, pamphlets, and publications. Movies provided the opportunity to present birth control advocates in a positive light, and to dramatize their battles as a fight between the forces for good and their oppressors. The legal disputes which then erupted around the country over the

showing of such films also served their cause, vividly illustrating the power of Comstockery to inhibit women's access to information. While historians have characterized this era as one of declining radicalism as the movement sought to build alliances with elite groups, my study of their media activities suggests that birth control advocates continued to court controversy by repeatedly challenging the conventions of acceptable discourse which barred the broadcast of birth control.

When the enforcement of the Hays code pushed the topic out of respectable filmmaking, the movement turned to the radio instead. At first the airwaves were no more hospitable than the movies had been. As a result, birth control advocates continued to focus on the justifications for family limitation rather than any detailed explanation of methods, and they tailored their rhetoric to complement political trends as well as to conform to broadcasting standards. During the Great Depression, for example, media material focused on the role of birth control in alleviating economic hardship; in wartime, on the need for services to enable women to contribute to the war effort; and after the war, on the value of family planning for young couples seeking to settle down and enjoy life in peacetime.

As radio matured as a medium and the standard of broadcasts improved, family planning advocates focused on producing high-quality programming to keep up with the competing efforts of entertainment broadcasters and other messaging organizations, including health educators. To do so, they turned to media specialists for help with scriptwriting and the selection of presenters. With the medical profession's endorsement of birth control in the 1930s, a new cadre of professionals could be added to the panels of businessmen and religious leaders who represented

support for the issue among community leaders on radio discussion shows. The inclusion of such experts served to tie family planning to respectable fields and political trends. My research has shown that the organization also began to professionalize its approach to media by drawing on the theories of the emerging field of health communication. In the ensuing decades, communications specialists became increasingly active in the field of family planning.

In the postwar years, the specter of worldwide overpopulation fueled unprecedented government and philanthropic investment in the promotion of family planning at home and around the world, the subjects of chapters three and four. In the United States, advocates took their message into the homes of the nation's families via radio and television. These broadcasts highlighted the negative consequences associated with unrestricted population growth internationally and promoted family planning as the solution. Programming included a range of experts from the burgeoning field of the social sciences to address the expanding range of services now offered by Planned Parenthood, from marriage counseling to infertility treatment.

As broadcasters set out to demonstrate their relevance in the wake of criticisms of bland commercialism in the late 1950s and '60s, media producers began to address previously off-limits subjects and develop programming on the issue of family planning, and even abortion. Enjoying unprecedented levels of federal support and public acceptance, the organization launched a national advertising campaign and began to tackle controversial topics such as race in their media efforts, as I describe in chapter three. Although writers were gaining the confidence to tackle such topics,

networks remained nervous about sexually-related content or the use of risqué humor. Family planning messaging thus remained conspicuously sex-free, even in the heady days of the sexual revolution. The messages of the organization became increasingly tame even as advertising and entertainment media broadcast more explicit material. As J. Mayone Stycos, founder and director of the International Population Program at Cornell University and critic of the “desexing” of family planning argued in 1977, “just as modern advertising has spent the last half-century infusing the subject of sex into areas where it has no business, family planners have been busily eradicating sex from the one place where it uniquely belongs.”<sup>1</sup>

Seeking less restrictive avenues to promote their ideas, some family planning promoters began to cultivate informal partnerships with entertainment media producers, such as Norman Lear, or, like Martha Stuart, left to launch their own organizations. My research introduces these efforts into the history of the birth control movement for the first time. While leading to innovative approaches to broadcast family planning in the mass media, this work also helped to mobilize an aggressive New Right movement. These opponents were highly critical of the increasing liberalization of American attitudes towards sexuality that was apparent in narrowing legal definitions of obscenity, the rising prevalence of sexualized imagery in mass culture, and, indeed, in the expansion of birth control services nationwide.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Desexing Birth Control,” 290.

<sup>2</sup> See John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). This shift was highly contested and included periods of increased restriction as well as times of greater freedom. Joanne Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8 (Fall 1996).

As the clash intensified in the battle over abortion, media skirmishes became more frequent. The whisper campaign against the Children's Television Workshop was just one of many attempts to derail Planned Parenthood's media activities and destroy the organization's credibility by groups intent on rolling back legal abortion, sex education, and the provision of contraception. Opponents also began to utilize media propaganda to counter the messaging of family planning promoters. As I illustrate, the ferociousness of the assault on family planning (and Planned Parenthood in particular) had a chilling effect on the organization's media activities.

In chapter four, I revisit the same period of time to examine the impact of these domestic trends on the international activities of family planning promoters. As they took their media campaigns to other countries they applied the same tentative approach resorted to at home, perhaps unsurprisingly given the suspicion with which they were regarded by foreign governments in developing countries. From the first films to dramatize the threat of overpopulation to motivational movies encouraging individuals to have fewer children, media producers working with the largest groups in the field, including the International Planned Parenthood Federation and USAID, limited their arguments to the economic benefits of smaller families rather than the sexual freedom contraception could bestow, as the examples I have presented here attest.

Sexual discourse was, of course, heavily circumscribed to private forums rather than the public arenas of mass media, although, as I have argued, family planning promoters sought to challenge this division as the very means to legitimize the topic. While they were repeatedly successful in broadcasting the issue to

audiences far and wide, programming rarely addressed sexual issues directly, even though simple messages about the sexual benefits of contraception might have been easier to communicate than the less immediate or tangible rewards of financial stability and the ability to educate one's children which were used instead.

Undoubtedly the political issues framing international activities had much to do with this strategy, with sexual freedom negatively associated with modernizing social systems and the transformation of women's roles and status.

In response to feminist criticisms of the population control movement and developing countries' challenge of the West's narrow focus on fertility control, family planning promoters began to reframe their work to better serve the reproductive health goals of their target communities in the 1970s. The enthusiasm for media that had generated a vast catalog of films began to waver, as health communication scholars documented the failure of novel or "foreign" techniques to influence audiences in the intended manner. Instead, they began to focus on indigenous forms of communication, and to broaden their messaging from simplistic economic appeals to incorporate wider issues such as women's changing role in society. The return to locally produced media exemplified by "folk" productions and the shift to video described in chapter four, and the entertainment-education initiatives of chapter five served a very practical purpose in the context of rising conservatism in the United States and the Mexico City policy, as well as representing the philosophical shift in health communication away from top-down communications to a grassroots model. Folk media was more affordable and cheaper



to distribute than film and could fill the gap created by the collapse of United States funding for international family planning media.

The use of dramatic narratives, first employed in early birth control cinema, was taken to a new level at the end of the 1970s by Miguel Sabido. As I discuss, media played a central role in the transformation of Mexico's previously pronatalist national policy. The techniques perfected and evaluated there proved enormously influential, as the *telenovela* became the leading model of family planning media and a cornerstone of the field of health communication in general. A key reason, I argue, was that Sabido's work reintroduced the context of lust and sexual activity, amid the drama of relationships and the power dynamics between men and women, that was evident in early birth control cinema but which had been driven out of family planning over the ensuing decades.

## **Causes and Effects**

Although the campaign to legalize contraception was successful, the compromises the pioneers of the birth control movement initiated and those of their successors in the promotion of family planning have had profound implications for reproductive health. Sanger and her colleagues toned down their feminist rhetoric of sexual liberation in their attempts to build mainstream support. Although movement activists continued to broadcast their message in a variety of media, censorship and broadcasting conventions further diluted the kinds of representations they could promote on the movie screen, over the radio, and on the nation's television sets. As they negotiated for access to public platforms from which to promote their cause,

advocates minimized the connections between contraception and sexual freedom. In this way, the medium helped to shape the messages of the movement, as campaigners for legalized birth control (and later, family planning use) gradually de-emphasized sex.

As feminist historians have charged, family planning promoters gave up the reconfiguration of gender roles that sexual liberation, first proposed and then abandoned by Sanger, had promised. With the exception of work like Martha Stuart's television series and Sabido's *telenovela*, they shied away from tackling sexuality and the structural causes of social inequality in their campaigns for individual attitude and behavior change, ceding the territory of sex to the New Right. As a result, the movement missed the opportunity to put women fully in charge of their reproductive lives. Historians have traced the global legacy of that compromise in the history of sterilization abuses, unequal access to contraception, and the narrow agenda of international population control. With the intensifying right-wing assaults on abortion rights apparent in the so-called "partial birth" abortion ban, the harassment of patients and healthcare providers at family planning centers, and state regulations mandating parental notification or a waiting period between a pregnancy test and a termination, it is increasingly apparent that the limited focus on reproductive rights, disconnected from a broader critique of gender and power, has also weakened the movement's ability to protect access to abortion, emergency contraception, and even sex education in the United States.

The emergence of the AIDS pandemic cast these limitations into stark relief. Despite decades of media-based family planning campaigns, when the transmission

routes of the disease were identified in the 1980s, and condoms recognized as a means to prevent infection, controversy regarding the public discussion of sex and the specifics of contraception strictly confined health education efforts. The government's reticence to address not just homosexuality but also heterosexuality, even as the death toll and infection rate rose exponentially among both populations, existed in spite of, and to some degree in response to, an increasingly sexualized mass culture. I would argue that it also reflects the historical trajectory of the campaign to promote family planning.

Finally, while many scholars remain preoccupied with the question of the motivation of the international family planning movement, many of the gains of previous decades are being undermined by the restriction of reproductive rights around the world. Anti-imperialist critiques of the excesses of the population control era, and support for the idea of cultural relativism have dovetailed with the conservative agenda in the United States to greatly impede women's access to contraception globally. As journalist Michelle Goldberg writes in her overview of reproductive politics in recent decades, "the conflation of women's rights with globalization or Westernization, and the concomitant desire to limit them in the name of national or cultural integrity, is nearly universal."<sup>3</sup> Politicians as well as their electorate have resisted the idea of a major upheaval in the hierarchy of gender relations and blamed outsiders for the emergence of feminist organizing within their national borders. Moreover, in the years since the Mexico City meeting, succeeding U.S. administrations have illustrated their political leanings by endorsing or

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<sup>3</sup> *The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power, and the Future of the World* (The Penguin Press: New York, 2009), 4.

circumventing the restriction, reshaping reproductive health by funding or defunding services as well as by setting a standard followed by other nations.<sup>4</sup>

## **Family Planning Media Today**

As this dissertation has shown, mass media was not only central to the birth control/family planning movement, but family planning has also been critical to the development of the field of health communication, as exemplified by the international importance of the entertainment-education strategy. Indeed, the two leading American organizations currently involved in the use of the approach to promote health issues and positive social messages both have their roots in the communication of family planning: Population Communications International, established by David Poindexter, (who had been so instrumental in bringing the issue of the population explosion to American networks in the 1960s and 70s and transferring the Mexican model of entertainment-education to India); and the Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs, who partnered with the Airlie filmmaking team on dozens of USAID-funded films in the 1970s and '80s.

A modified version of the strategy is commonly used in the United States, as the wholesale series approach has not been fully embraced by commercial broadcasters, who fear alienating audiences or advertisers or stepping into controversies which might interfere with ratings and profits. Some argue that American audiences may also be more skeptical of deliberately educational or messaging programming, having been exposed to a wide range of media over a longer

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<sup>4</sup> The policy was rescinded by President Bill Clinton in 1993, reinstated by George W. Bush in 2001, and repealed by Congress on September 6, 2007.

period of time. To address this issue, rather than creating new media products, communications scholars have partnered with media producers to integrate messages into existing programs, just as Norman Lear did with the narratives of abortion and vasectomy in *Maude* in the 1970s with the encouragement of the U.S. family planning community. Broadcasters are happy to mine health-related plotlines to boost audience ratings and can now draw on the advice of consultants to ensure the accuracy of their hospital scenes and depictions of reproductive health issues and disease (although they will not always incorporate the advice given).<sup>5</sup> Indeed the “medicalized edutainment” of the “disease-of-the-week” shows that flourished in the 1970s has been replaced by a proliferation of other broadcasts addressing health issues, from dramas and dramatic reconstructions to talk shows and reality TV.<sup>6</sup>

Health communications specialists have capitalized on the rise of health topics across many genres, not only to correct the inaccurate representations that otherwise flourish but also to promote coverage of aspects of prevention and treatment for a wide range of health issues. The United States Centers for Disease Control collaborates with the Hollywood, Health & Society program at the University of Southern California’s Norman Lear Center to advise broadcasters on health messaging in entertainment media. Their staff offers storyline advice but leaves the production to media professionals, just as family planning promoters relied on Lear and Sabido to develop an engaging media experience decades before.

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<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the recent use of entertainment-education on American television see Vicki Beck, “Working with Daytime and Prime-Time Television Shows in the United States to Promote Health,” in Singhal et al, eds., *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*..

<sup>6</sup> “Medicalized Edutainment is Julie Elman Passanate’s term for the “disease of the week” shows she analyzes in “*After School Special* Education: Rehabilitative Television, Teen Citizenship, and Compulsory Able-Bodiedness,” *Television and New Media* 20, no. 10 (2010): 2.

Entertainment media offers subtle opportunities to integrate sex-related messaging in a more engaging format than explicitly educational media. Such programming provides a wealth of opportunities for family planning related messaging as commercial media has increasingly turned to sexual topics to attract viewers in the diversifying media landscape. A 1981 study found, for example, that primetime American television portrayed approximately 20,000 scenes of suggested sexual intercourse and sexual innuendo annually, even as the so-called “culture wars” between conservatives and progressives raged.<sup>7</sup> While sex-related storylines do not avoid controversy by any means, discussions of contraception have since become a standard aspect of many dramatic portrayals of sexual activity in the era of AIDS. In fact, although the entertainment-education approach is used for a wide range of health issues, the majority of productions have been developed in response to the AIDS crisis, creating an additional link between the future of health communication and the history of family planning promotion.

Writers of CBS entertainment’s *The Bold and the Beautiful*, for example, worked with advisors at the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to develop their narrative about a character who discovers he is HIV positive.<sup>8</sup> The episodes won a Sentinel Health Award for Daytime Drama from the CDC, just one of numerous initiatives health communications specialists have devised to encourage collaborations with media professionals. The awards are presented at annual “soap

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<sup>7</sup> J. N. Sprafkin and L. T. Silverman, “Update: Physically Intimate and Sexual Behavior on Prime-Time Television, 1978-79,” *Journal of Communication* 31, cited in Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers, eds., *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), 8.

<sup>8</sup> The genre has also proven effective in delivering other health messages such as early cancer screening, responsible drinking when driving, and the prevention of heart disease.

summits” in Los Angeles and New York hosted by Poindexter’s Population Communications International.<sup>9</sup>

Traditional, educational health communication strategies are unlikely to make a major impact in the increasingly diverse commercial cultural landscape. This invests strategies like Miguel Sabido’s with even greater significance. As health communications scholars Lawrence Wallack and Kathryn Montgomery note,

Limited resources for health education and promotion provide little hope that the sophisticated, pervasive advertising messages, often based on emotional appeals, will be overcome by limited quantities of rational, factual materials.<sup>10</sup>

“Affective” programming, particularly any, like the *telenovelas*, which can also generate commercial success, has the greatest likelihood of finding both a media outlet and an audience in this context, according to Sabido and his colleagues in the field.

Witnessing the death from AIDS of a favorite soap opera character, and seeing the grief of his parents, infected widow, and child, may serve as a more powerful trigger for adopting a prevention behavior than rationally-structured media messages promoting condom use and other safer sex behaviors.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, partnerships between health communications experts and their media colleagues are now a staple of the field. This collaboration goes beyond the kind of “technical advising” provided by medical and scientific consultants on television shows and Hollywood films, a more widely known phenomenon. In fact, health communication activities seem to operate somewhat “under the radar” in America. Of course, exposing the deliberately and carefully integrated message hidden in popular

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<sup>9</sup> Singhal et al, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> “Advertising for All by the Year 2000: Public Health Implications for Less Developed Countries,” *Journal of Public Health Policy* 13, no. 2 (1992): 218.

<sup>11</sup> Singhal et al, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*, 13.

programming is likely to undermine its efficacy for audiences, who may resent attempts to “doctor” their entertainment.

Media saturation in the United States also means that audiences are highly segmented (making it difficult to reach a majority of viewers) and bombarded with competing and conflicting messages.<sup>12</sup> Yet even though the culture differs from emerging media markets in other countries in its degree of fragmentation and the sheer breadth of available broadcasting, it turns out that target audiences here may not be as different as communications scholars once thought. In fact, the entertainment-education approach is valued in the U.S. for the same reasons it has been successful in so-called developing nations: it can reach a wide audience, many of whom have limited access to health care, “pay less attention to print and broadcast news, and have more difficulty understanding what they read.”<sup>13</sup> Such audiences may not exhibit the more sophisticated awareness of messaging often assumed of people with longer exposure to such a broad array of media. Indeed a significant proportion of health communication work serves to correct the myths disseminated by commercial media, from misleading drug advertizing to incomplete news coverage of scientific discoveries and dramatic exaggerations of medical situations for entertainment value, based on evidence that audiences gather health-related information from such untrustworthy sources.

Communications experts appear caught between the need to prove the efficacy of their approach and a reluctance to admit that the media can influence the public just as advertising does, meaning that even as they critique and counter negative or

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<sup>12</sup> J. L. Sherry, “Media Saturation and Entertainment-Education,” *Communication Theory* 12:2 (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Singhal et al, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*, 212.



inaccurate messages, they rarely publicize their role in the successful inclusion of positive messages to anyone beyond the public health community. This is particularly true of family planning messaging, which appears to be more controversial than information related to the prevention of drunk driving or heart disease, given the very vocal minority who actively campaign against broadcasters addressing the topic.

Public health and communications scholars have also become increasingly concerned about the negative health impacts resulting from the expanding global reach of American culture, especially the advertizing of tobacco, alcohol, pesticides and pharmaceuticals by multinational corporations seeking to create new consumer markets. Indeed, at the same time that the United States government was pulling back from international family planning promotion, American commercial media was proliferating in other countries as the largest broadcasters consolidated their dominance globally. Critics note that these powerful industries promote a culture which derails health spending and instead redirects funds to dangerous products and other luxury goods. This phenomenon affects national policy as well as family economies, as governments finance infrastructure for cars and other items only available to a minority of elites, at the expense of more widely beneficial initiatives. They note that much lifestyle advertizing contains inaccurate health information or minimizes the risks associated with the products for sale, from cigarettes to infant formula.

The shift away from health education towards entertainment-education pioneered in family planning looks set to continue across the field of health communication, with opportunities to counter negative advertizing few and far

between because of the influence of multinational corporations and the profit-motive of the media outlets they utilize. Programming that can promise commercial success is much more likely to secure airtime (and audiences) than any relying on slim or non-existent regulations and incentives motivating broadcasters to feature educational content.

With the global market for American culture, entertainment media now makes its way to audiences around the world. While many countries have undertaken their own entertainment-education efforts, audiences are also tuning in to American dramas that include integrated health messages. *The Bold and the Beautiful*, for example, has an estimated 300 million viewers in 110 countries, including Egypt, India, China, the Philippines, and Uganda.<sup>14</sup> Successful projects first undertaken at home can thus have a major international impact.

As these trends illustrate, if the medical profession was once the most powerful constituency controlling the representation of health topics in the media, as the editors of *Medicine's Moving Pictures: Medicine, Health, and Bodies in American Film and Television* assert, they are increasingly likely today to share that role not only with the health communication profession but also members of the media. This transformation was forged in the early history of the birth control movement and consolidated by the expansion and professionalization of international family planning. In this transnational exchange, both the message of birth control, and the media through which it was delivered, were exported around the world. The flow of ideas was not one-way, moreover, as the Mexican model of entertainment-education illustrates. Methods developed in one region have been disseminated far

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<sup>14</sup> Singhal et al, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*, 208.

and wide, as the strategies of family planning communication have been rolled out in the global effort to combat AIDS and to promote public health.

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