

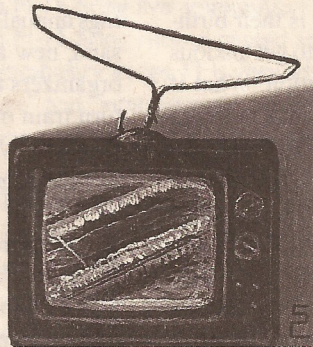
YOUNG WOMEN, WHO'VE NEVER LACKED ABORTION RIGHTS, ARE TOUGH TO MOBILIZE.

# The Pro-choice PR Problem

JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER

About a decade ago, the DeMoss Foundation commissioned the “Life. What a Beautiful Choice” advertising campaign. The commercial spots themselves were deliberately uncontroversial, going for gorgeous Reagan-era images of happy kids and unharried parents rather than the more familiar anti-choice portrait of gored nine-month “fetuses.” They associated joy, family and fulfillment with the antiabortion position. The word “abortion” was never uttered; the American “value” of life was. They ran in heavy rotation on big networks like CBS and ABC, not to mention CNN and scads of local affiliates.

Feel-good images aside, the ads had a calculated political



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purpose. They were lobbed at the kind of semi-conservative areas that could go anti-choice with a little nudge—like Arizona in 1992, during a ballot initiative campaign that aimed to outlaw abortion. It’s impossible to gauge the precise impact, but the “Life. What A Beautiful Choice” ads reflected and supported a surge in grassroots anti-choice activism, from the Lambs of Christ 1991 siege of Fargo, North Dakota, to Operation Rescue’s 1991 Summer of Mercy in Wichita, Kansas.

The pro-choice movement didn’t have anything like that—until 1999, that is, when a coalition called the Pro-choice Public Education Project (PEP) hired the prizewinning New York agency DeVito/Verdi to design a series of ads illustrating the American “value” of choice. PEP is a consortium of more than fifty women’s rights organizations, with a steering committee that includes NARAL, Planned Parenthood and the Ms. Foundation. If you live in New York City, you can’t have missed its first set of ads—posters consisting of a black and white image with red type,

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*Jennifer Baumgardner, the author, with Amy Richards, of Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) helped organize the History in Action speakout on abortion. Research support for this article was provided by a grant from the Open Society Institute.*

prominently displayed in subways and on buses throughout the city. (DeVito/Verdi got the pro-choice artist Barbara Kruger's permission to imitate her style.) The ads illustrate the sexism and apathy behind the erosion of abortion rights. For example, "77 percent of anti-abortion leaders are men," reads one poster, featuring a photo of dour old white patriarchs. "100 percent of them will never be pregnant." Another, in which a tattooed and pierced 20something gazes up at the camera, asks provocatively, "You think you can do what you want with your body? Think again." A new series of subway posters just about to be launched contains images that vividly recall the back alley.

These campaigns are one response to what could be described as the pro-choice movement's growing PR problem: The number of young people who say they support abortion rights has declined every year except one since 1990, according to a well-regarded annual UCLA study of incoming freshmen. There are more pro-choice than anti-choice Americans, yet many of the people who support abortion rights don't appear to feel the need to fight to insure those rights. For example, nearly two-thirds of the respondents to a Lake Snell Perry survey conducted in late 1999 strongly favored *Roe v. Wade*. Yet when asked if they'd be "worried if the next President tried to overturn *Roe v. Wade* through Supreme Court appointments," less than half said they'd lose any sleep over it. Chads and butterfly ballots aside, that carefree attitude was confirmed in the last election. One of Bush's first acts as President was to reactivate the global gag rule, cutting off US aid to overseas clinics that provide information on abortion. And, the National Abortion Rights Action League reports, more than 435 restrictions on abortion were brought before state legislators in 2000.

PEP ads attempt to reckon with the biggest gripe having to do with young people and abortion today—that young women tend to view reproductive freedom as their "birthright." This statement needs some deconstruction: Most younger women were born after *Roe* and thus with the right to an abortion (*ergo*, it is their birthright). The problem is that young women are asked to get anxious about what is, in many ways, a hypothetical situation. What if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned? What if your only choice was to bear a child you don't want or go to a back-alley butcher? "You can't just go out and say to young women and men, 'these are the threats, it's so awful, go do something about it,'" says Marion Sullivan, a former pollster and legislative aide who directed PEP until this past summer. PEP's survey of 1,000 women age 16 to 25 suggested that young women are more likely than the population as a whole to call themselves pro-choice, yet also very likely to define choice broadly—and to tolerate restrictions. "We have to reach young women where they are," says Sullivan. "If they say they are pro-choice for others and 'pro-life' for themselves, it's our job to educate them that supporting these restrictions makes them 'pro-life' on behalf of others, too."

"I don't have a gripe with the ads—who would?" says Annie Keating, a staffer at Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health who worked at NARAL-NYC for many years. "It's the priorities. Frankly, ads and electoral work are not going to sustain

a movement, and no one will fund an activist campaign around limited access."

Indeed, in a movement with scarce resources, the cost of placing even a few prime-time ads can be a huge drain, crowding out critical organizing projects. "The actual cost per ad is incredibly high," confirms Marion Sullivan. "It's a multimillion-dollar campaign, and it costs a lot to have a great firm." DeVito/Verdi did pro bono work for eight months, but the printing of the subway posters alone cost \$15,000. Typically, a single thirty-second TV spot costs around \$300,000 to produce (although the PEP ads were done for "considerably less," according to Ellis Verdi, the president of DeVito/Verdi). That's before buying the expensive airtime, magazine and newspaper real estate, or space in subways and on the sides of buses. NARAL alone spent \$7.5 million during the last election cycle, including \$1.5 million for an ad opposing Ralph Nader (targeted to the half-dozen or so states in which he was endangering Gore).

Meanwhile, other pro-choice organizations, eschewing the blare of advertising, are dedicating themselves to the grassroots organizing techniques that have worked for the feminist movement in the past. Last April, the day taxes were due and the A16 protesters were raising a ruckus in our nation's capital, Chrystal Plati addressed a room of forty alternative-looking female students at American University, testifying about an urgent campaign for access to reproductive choice.

Plati is a 27-year-old Cypriot-American with glossy brown hair and apple cheeks. She is employed as the executive director of Choice USA, a non-

profit public education organization founded by Gloria Steinem and others in 1991, the year after *Rust v. Sullivan* imposed the gag rule on US clinics that received federal funds, meaning abortion couldn't be mentioned as an option.

Plati looks at organizing to protect reproductive choice as a grassroots affair. The process is this: Choice USA's staff of ten women makes as many campus visits as they can. They network with existing organizations, conduct sixty or so leadership trainings annually and emerge with a few hundred, maybe a few thousand, new and well-trained organizers every few years. Those organizers then train more people in their communities, who in turn train more people. In this way, the force of dedicated pro-choice activists increases multifold, much in the way Amway gets its salespeople.

At American University, Amy Ray and Emily Saliers (better known as the rock/folk duo the Indigo Girls) and Karen O'Connor, a professor at AU and author of a book about the abortion struggle, joined Plati on the dais, fielding questions from a knowledgeable crew of students. The Q & A and the fundraising concert later that night drew a sizable crowd. "The students' association that we spoke to told me they want to start a chapter of Choice USA here," Plati said later, clearly pleased. Choice USA currently has twenty-five chapters in different stages of development.

"I think we need a lot of different tactics—media and organizing need to go hand in hand," said Plati the day after she got back from conducting leadership training in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

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yet many who support abortion rights don't  
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“Look, I’m going to be really honest,” she says. “The bottom line is that all of this money is going to a PEP ad campaign, and we are competing for that same money, just to get information into the hands of women who need it.” Choice USA—which has a handful of staffers who all make in the \$26,000 to \$35,000 range, and fifteen interns some of whom get small stipends—had its plate full that month. They were helping to launch CARE, a coalition-based Campaign for Access and Reproductive Equity, which focuses on prohibitive measures that keep poor women from getting abortion and contraception services. In other words, CARE is an activist campaign built around limited access. (CARE has one staff member—the activist Leslie Watson—and has organized eighteen campus chapters.)

A few days after I met with Plati, Ellis Verdi screened a sixty-second commercial the agency had just completed for PEP. The idea was that commercials would “take PEP up to the next level,” in terms of message and medium. In a room stuffed with industry awards, I viewed their minutelong masterpiece: A college-age biracial girl walks while Beth Gibbons from the trip-hop band Portishead sings plaintively, “We got a war to fight here.” She is shadowed by three dour patriarchs who look a lot like Congressmen. As she goes about her business, every channel, meal and garment the woman selects is changed by the gang of old white guys to what they think she should have. In the final image, the girl is standing in a very frumpy Laura Ashley dress the guys chose for her. She looks trapped. The ad was amazing. Too bad it isn’t on TV. In fact, it was rejected by NBC, ABC, Fox and CBS. According to an article by Jennifer Pozner in *Extra!*, all four offered similar explanations: that it was too “controversial” and that advocacy is not appropriate on network television. (The networks did, on the other hand, accept the anti-choice ads in the early 1990s.) To date, the PEP ad has aired only on one Fox affiliate in San Francisco.

Even if it had been shown nationwide, would a TV ad intended to raise consciousness have had any lasting effect on the political reality of choice? Doubtful, especially since ads don’t address the incremental encroachments on choice that affect women in the age of *Roe*. The PEP ads aren’t about being unable to pay for an abortion or how parental consent laws might be at the root of the grisly “prom mom” cases. “The problem with these ad campaigns that don’t directly relate to organizing is that there is no way to follow up or build on them,” Chrystal Plati told me. You have your Hallmark moment, “but then what?” NARAL president Kate Michelman concedes, “It’s not effective by itself, without the follow-up and grassroots piece.” But, she argues, “if you don’t reach them, then you can never really count on activating them.”

The trouble is that the “grassroots piece” often ends up being an afterthought. The DeVito/Verdi posters were made available to local affiliates to use, but merely having fresh propaganda is unlikely to do much to swell the ranks of, say, Planned Parenthood of Appleton, Wisconsin, nor did it succeed in electing the pro-choice presidential candidate. And, although the PEP television spot is powerful to watch, without an activist pro-choice grassroots beneath it—without even the ability to get on the air—it can’t have the impact to justify its steep price tag. The biggest difference between the anti-choice ads and the pro-choice ones

is that the former came after a visible, militant anti-choice movement had emerged. PEP is approaching the problem from the other direction: trying to create a movement from ads, hoping to invigorate the couch potatoes.

Efforts to engage young women more directly in the struggle for abortion rights and to learn from them are therefore essential. This past October, for instance, an intergenerational group of feminists called History in Action sponsored an intergeneration abortion speakout and teach-in at New York's Judson Memorial Church, the site of a historic abortion referral service. Thirty years ago, young radical feminists known as Redstockings organized a legendary speakout after interrupting an "expert" abortion hearing (consisting of fourteen men and a nun). Their novel idea was that the women who have to get abortions are the "real experts." At the recent speakout, well-known activists like Rosalyn Baxandall and Florence Rice revisited their own illegal abortions (hideous experiences, all), and Ellen Willis, an original Redstocking, explained that it wasn't until women organized on their own behalf that New York abortion law was liberalized. Then younger

women talked about their post-*Roe* procedures. The legal abortions were, of course, safer, but the difficult experiences these women described surprised the women who had fought to legalize abortion. One of the last speakers was 20-year-old Lebwah Sykes, the membership/network coordinator of the Third Wave Foundation, one of the three national organizations that fund abortions for women, devoting \$18,000 directly to grants for that purpose last year. (Third Wave funds only women under 30.) The majority of calls Sykes gets are for second-trimester abortions; the reason these young women wait is that they have to raise the money. "Often the woman has already gotten a second job," says Sykes, "but realizes a month or two later that she is not going to earn the money fast enough, and then we get called."

Meanwhile, some new ads appeared in the New York City subways this past fall. This time the anti-choice organization that sponsored them didn't go for happy grownups relishing the cozy wonder of having children. They went for pictures of fully-developed fetuses. ■