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“Pregnancy and labour cause more deaths than oral contraceptives”: the debate on the pill in the Spanish press in the 1960s and 1970s

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#### Author biography

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Agata Ignaciuk (MA) is currently working on her PhD dissertation in the Department of the History of Science of the University of Granada. Her PhD research project on discourses, debates and practices related to oral contraceptive pill in Poland and Spain (1960s-1970s) is sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Education. Her interests include history of contraception and abortion approached from feminist and intersectional research perspectives.

#### Abstract

From 1941 to 1978, Franco’s regime in Spain banned all contraceptive methods. The pill started circulating in this country from the 1960s, officially as a drug used in gynaecological therapy. However, in the following decade it was also increasingly used and prescribed as a contraceptive. This paper analyzes debates about the contraceptive pill in the Spanish daily newspaper *ABC* and in two magazines, *Blanco y Negro* and *Triunfo*, in the 1960s and 1970s. It concludes that the debate on this contraceptive method was much more heterogeneous than might be expected given the Catholic-conservative character of the dictatorship. The daily press focused on the adverse effects of the drug and magazines concentrated on the ethical and religious aspects of the pill

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and discussed it in a generally positive light. Male doctors and Catholic authors dominated the debate.

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“Pregnancy and labour cause more deaths than oral contraceptives”: the debate on the pill in the Spanish press in the 1960s and 1970s

## **Introduction**

In 1960, when the first contraceptive pill was marketed in the United States, all contraceptive methods were prohibited in Spain. The pro-natalist and extreme nationalist Catholic policies imposed by the Francoist regime after the Spanish civil war offered incentives to large families and legally banned any form of contraception. The Francoist norm remained valid throughout the dictator’s lifetime and it was not until 1978, three years after his death, that contraception – especially hormonal contraception – was decriminalised. However, anti-contraceptive state regulations did not impede the circulation of contraceptive drugs, which had become available on Spanish markets in the early 1960s as therapeutic gynaecological medicines. In this paper, we will analyse debates about the circulation and legalization of the pill in the 1960s and 1970s, a period that comprises the last fifteen years of Francoism and the beginning of Spanish democracy. We analyse how knowledge and issues relating to hormonal contraception were represented, discussed, and popularized in the Spanish media. Our analysis adds to the recent work of other scholars who are using the press and other media as sources in their accounts of the social and cultural history of birth control and hormonal contraceptives (Parry, 2011; Silies, 2010).

This article will first examine contraception during Franco’s regime (from 1939 to 1975) and the changes that resulted after contraceptive pills became available on

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international and Spanish markets. Next, we analyse reports on oral contraception that appeared in the Spanish press and magazines during the 1960s and 1970s. We focus on the actors and issues involved in these public debates and assess the representations of the roles of women and medical professionals in that debate. We argue that the print media played a significant role in the popularization of the contraceptive pill during the period when it was legally banned. Furthermore, the print media contributed to a lively social debate about contraception that challenged the reproductive politics of the authoritarian regime.

### **Contraception during Francoism**

On 24 January 1941, almost two years after the victory of Franco’s army over the republican state, the newly-constituted regime established a law on ‘the protection of natality, against abortion and contraceptionist propaganda’ (“Ley”, 1941). The law, which remained on the books until 1978, was part of wider legal regulations designed to reconstruct the country. This reconstruction included the promotion of a new ideal of femininity, which consisted of symbolically placing women within households as mothers of many children, subordinated to fathers or husbands, and removed from the productive sphere (Di Febo, 2003). Article fourteen of the law punished any distribution of the methods or practices aimed at ‘avoiding procreation’ with imprisonment and a fine. The law also prohibited any form of contraceptive propaganda (“Ley”, 1941). During Francoism, the Spanish Penal Code codified the economic and carceral penalties facing health professionals, manufacturers, and individuals who sold or distributed information on contraceptives (Abella & Abella, 1974, pp. 170-179 & 197-213). In

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addition, specific state regulations on new drugs introduced to the Spanish market after 1963 not only explicitly prohibited any mention of abortive or contraceptive effects arising from the use of pharmaceutical products but also stipulated that all hormonal drugs be available only on prescription (“Decreto”, 1963; “Orden”, 1965, p. 14). At the time, some democratic countries also imposed restrictions on the sale and advertising of certain contraceptive methods, as well as on contraceptive research. Although in Germany no legal obstacles to the circulation of contraceptives existed after 1945 (Silies, 2010; David & Skilogianis, 1999) and in Britain contraception was never legally forbidden (Latham, 2002, p. 25 & 29), prohibitions remained on the books until 1967 in France and until 1971 in Italy and the US (Latham, 2002, p. 84 & 93; Galeotti, 2003, p. 116; Marks, 2001b, p. 33).

The trend of Spanish birth rates demonstrates that the Francoist pro-natalist policies were only partially successful. While birth rates in Spain had stabilized in the post-war period and remained one of the highest in Europe in the 1970s, they followed the general declining trend that had been observed in Europe since the late nineteenth century (Díez Nicolás, 1971). It is difficult to evaluate the role played by any specific contraceptive method in this decline in birth rates before the 1970s, but it seems clear that prohibiting advertising and selling contraceptives did not prevent Spanish women and couples, especially those from the middle class, from acting to reduce the size of their families if they wanted to (Díez Nicolás, 1973). The situation changed radically during the 1970s, and the commercialisation and use of the pill likely had much to do with that change.

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The first contraceptive pill, *Enovid*, was introduced to the American market in 1957 by the pharmaceutical company Searle as a treatment for gynaecological disorders (Junod, 2007, p. 117). Although its properties as an ovulation inhibitor were known by most medical doctors who prescribed it, it was not until 1960 that Searle received FDA approval for *Enovid* to be re-marketed as a contraceptive (Junod & Marks, 2002, p. 155). On the European continent, the most widely used contraceptive was probably *Anovlar*, a trademark with a new composition that started to be distributed by Schering in West Germany in 1961 (Schering Stiftung/Scheringiraum, 2006). The Schering pharmaceutical company, based in Berlin, had been one of the leaders of European research on hormones since the 1920s and in the 1960s became a principal manufacturer of oral contraceptives in Europe (Gaudillière, 2005).

Publications in the Spanish medical press from the early 1960s reveal that Spanish doctors knew and tried products such as *Anovlar*, *Enovid* (produced by Schering) and *Lyndiol* (produced by the Dutch pharmaceutical company Organon) (Rodríguez-Ocaña, Ignaciuk & Ortiz-Gómez, 2012). However, it was only in 1964 that *Productos Químicos Schering*, a local branch of German Schering, began larger scale commercialisation of *Anovial 21*, a drug identical to *Anovlar*, but now distributed in a new calendar-pack with twenty-one pills (Productos Químicos Schering, 1964). By 1966, at least seven of the eighteen trademarks circulating on the international market (Klopper, 1965) were available in Spain (Botella-Llusiá, 1966). To comply with Spanish law, these products were introduced not as contraceptive pills, but as ‘oral cycle regulators’, such as *Anovial 21* (Schering, 1964), or as ‘ovulostatics’, like *Eugynon*

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(Schering AG, n. d.) or *Neogynona* (Schering AG/Schering España, 1972). During the 1970s, posters, advertisements, booklets, and package inserts continued to inform consumers that hormonal contraceptives should be used to allow for ‘periodic rest of the ovaries’ (“La anticoncepción”, 2005; Schering AG, n. d.; Schering AG/Schering España, 1972).

Data on the number of boxes sold in Spain are scarce and derived from a variety of indirect sources (see Figure 1). Discrepancies that arose between different circulation numbers had been the object of criticism already in the 1970s. The inaccessibility of accurate records, social controversy about contraception in Spain during the late 1960s and 1970s, and the lack of transparency that characterised the political regime in Spain might all have contributed to the discrepancies.

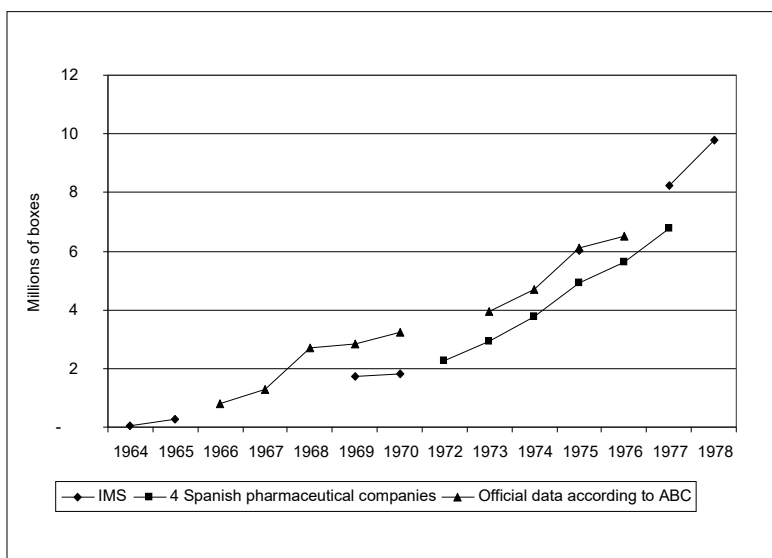


Figure 1. Sales of hormonal contraceptives in Spain (1964-1978).

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Source: Number of boxes sold from 1964 to 1978 (the data for IMS is cited in Sánchez Carazo, 1998, p. 592-597, for Spanish pharmaceutical companies is in Hernández Rodríguez, 1979, and the official data according to *ABC* is in “Las mujeres españolas gastarán”, 1978).

Even though the data is incomplete, we can still visualise the growing market for hormonal contraceptives from 1964, when *Anovial 21* first appeared on the Spanish market, to 1978, when they were decriminalised. The rising sales of the pill are indirect evidence of the growing preference of women for this contraceptive method. Equally indirect evidence can be found in the opinion polls regarding family planning in Spain during the 1970s (Díez Nicolás, 1973; Sánchez Carazo 1998, p. 152). In a representative opinion poll in 1972, 72% of Spanish women admitted to “have heard about the pill”. According to this poll, oral contraception was the best known method among respondents; the pill, however, was also considered the most dangerous method (Díez Nicolás, 1973). In 1977, a Spanish Fertility Survey revealed that 18% of women had at some point used the pill and that 12% currently used it. The pill continued to be the best known contraceptive method, with 88% of women claiming familiarity with it (Díez Nicolás & de Miguel, 1981)

### **The Spanish press during the 1960s and 1970s**

In Francoist Spain, as in other non-democratic regimes, the press was a vehicle for propagating the state’s ideology and policy amongst ordinary people and was under strict political control, especially during the initial and most repressive phase of Francoism between 1939 and 1945 (Townson, 2007). A Press Law approved in 1938



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officially subordinated the press to the state and installed pre-print censorship for all media (Bordería Ortiz, 2000, p.26). In 1966, a new Press Law replaced preventive censorship with ‘volunteer consultation’, fines and the suspension of publication.

Although the Press Law of 1966 itself did not instantly liberalize the Spanish press, it did trigger a slow process of erosion of state control over the media, resulting in a bit more space for pluralism and dissension (Bordería Ortiz, 2000, p. 250, Juliá Díaz, 2010, p. 235).

During late Francoism, two of the leading daily newspapers were *ABC*, based in Madrid, and *La Vanguardia Española*, published in Barcelona (Simelio Solà, 2006) (p. 152). *ABC* had been founded in 1903 and remains one of the oldest private Spanish newspapers in existence. While its main edition was published in Madrid, it also had a local edition in Seville. In 1970, it had the highest circulation of any Spanish newspaper. In Barcelona, *La Vanguardia* was the most popular Catalan daily and had been published since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1939 and 1978 the editors added *Española* to its title in order better to accommodate the new state ideology (Huertas, 2006, p. 120). The 1966 Press Law also led to the flourishing of new opinion magazines, such as *Triunfo*, *Cuadernos para el Dialogo*, and *Cambio 16* that were considered representatives of a new, independent press (Bordería Ortiz, 2000). These new magazines, together with some older ones such as *Blanco y Negro* edited by the *ABC*’s publishing group Prensa Española, published regularly on socially controversial topics and was subject, sporadically, to suspensions and fines (Bordería Ortiz, 2000; Iglesias, 1980, pp. 324, 371).

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In this paper, we analyze publications on oral contraception in *ABC*, *Blanco y Negro*, and *Triunfo* between 1960 and 1978. Our aim is to explore the differences and similarities in the circulation of pill-related ideas and debates in the daily press (specifically, in *ABC*, a related magazine *Blanco y Negro*, and in *La Vanguardia Española*<sup>1</sup> and in a key opinion magazine (*Triunfo*). The publications were accessed using online archives (<http://hemeroteca.abc.es/> and <http://www.triunfodigital.com/>).<sup>2</sup>

We selected a total of 119 items (short news, notices from international information agencies, announcements of conferences and other events, opinion articles, and round table discussions) and conducted a qualitative content analysis on 72 items from the Madrid and Seville editions of *ABC*, 27 from *Blanco y Negro*, and 20 from *Triunfo*.

### **The pill in the Spanish press**

There are no references to the contraceptive pill in the reviewed press before 1964 (Figure 2). The first article discussing the pill was published in *Triunfo* in 1964, the same year it appeared on the Spanish market. Its author, the theologian Enrique Miret Magdalena considered the pill to be a “natural” cycle regulator and a useful tool for enhancing the effectiveness of contraceptive methods that relied on cycle-observation (Miret Magdalena, 1964). Two years later, the first news published in *ABC*

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<sup>1</sup> Information in *La Vanguardia Española* (henceforth *La Vanguardia*) about the pill during the 1970s has been taken from Castillo García, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> In searching the *ABC/Blanco y Negro* database, we employed the key phrases ‘contraceptive pill’, ‘hormonal contraceptives’ and ‘anovulatories’, and for *Triunfo* the phrases ‘the pill’, ‘contraception’, ‘hormonal contraceptives’, ‘contraceptive methods’, and ‘family planning’.

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dealt with developments in foreign countries. There was an increase in the number of articles which culminated in 1968, the year of the publication of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, in which the Pope Paul VI definitely prohibited Catholics from using any “artificial” contraceptive methods. After Franco’s death at the end of 1975, the number of publications grew to a peak in 1978, when contraception was decriminalized. This increase, also registered in *La Vanguardia* (Castillo 2010, p. 63), corresponded with a lively social debate on contraceptives during the democratic transition, when the feminist movement, supported by democratic parties and some medical professionals, actively campaigned for political rights around the themes of contraception and family planning (Pelayo 2009; Bannel & Pérez-Serrano, 1999).

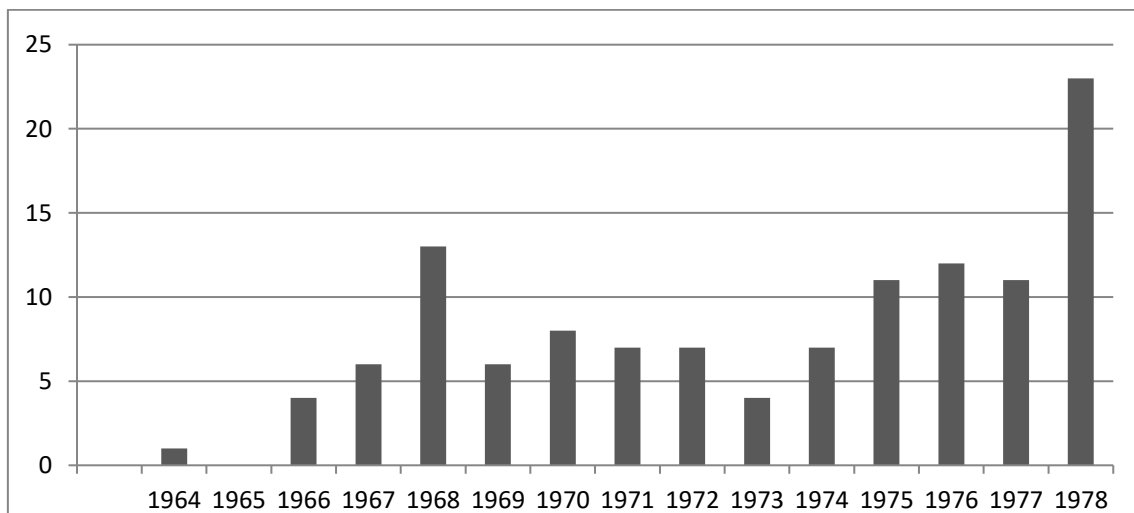


Figure 2. Number of articles on hormonal contraception published in *ABC*, *Blanco y Negro* and *Triunfo* (1964-1978).

Source: *ABC* and *Triunfo* online historical databases. Authors’ own elaboration.

### The participants in the debate on the pill

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Despite the fact that the first publication about the pill was an article authored by a theologian, physicians dominated the debate on hormonal contraception in the press. In *ABC* and *Blanco y Negro* they authored or were cited as the main authority, both medical and moral, in most of the articles. Apart from foreign experts, prominent Spanish doctors, mainly gynaecologists but also other specialists, were also quoted in many articles about the pill. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the majority of medical professionals who appeared in the pages of *ABC* focused on the side effects of hormonal contraception and some adopted positions in favour or against the pill. Among frequently quoted doctors, the best known was probably José Botella Llusía (1912-2002), a professor of gynaecology and obstetrics at Complutense University of Madrid, its Rector from 1968 to 1972, and a founder of the most important Spanish school of gynaecology during Francoism (Díaz Rubio, 2003, pp. 28-29). He published extensively, and from a clearly Catholic point of view, on family relations and the place of women in society (Sánchez, 1999, p. 182; Ignaciuk, Ortiz-Gómez & Rodríguez-Ocaña, in press). *ABC* mentioned him mainly in relation to the pill’s side effects and other technical aspects (“Coloquio internacional sobre la esterilidad”, 1967; Muñoz Atienza, 1972; “Las mujeres españolas gastarán”, 1978), while in *La Vanguardia* he was more frequently quoted in relation to the pill’s moral and religious aspects (Castillo García, 2010, p. 79-80).

During the first years of the transition from dictatorship to democracy (1975 to 1978), a general climate of liberalisation and political change spread quickly and the media echoed it precisely (Encarnación, 2001; Simelio Solá, 2010). In the case of

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contraception, the change was reflected in a growing number of articles in which doctors openly defended the pill and a couple’s right to receive information about contraception. One of the liberal gynaecologists whom *ABC* considered an authority on the pill in the late 1970s was Ángel Sopeña Ibáñez (1913-1991) (“Las relaciones sexuales”, 1975; “¿Píldora o esterilización?”, 1975; de León Sotelo, 1978), an assistant professor of gynaecology at Complutense University in Madrid and a member of the Spanish Communist Party known for his collaboration with the feminist family planning movement in the Spanish capital during the Democratic Transition (Ortiz-Gómez & Ignaciuk, 2010; “Fallece el Ginecólogo”, 1991). In 1976, *Triunfo* printed a large article by Santiago Dexeus, a prominent liberal Catalan gynaecologist and a firm supporter of family planning, in which he defended a couple’s right to birth control and criticized the discrepancies between the Francoist law that still banned contraceptive propaganda and the reality of increased consumption of the pill and other contraceptives (Dexeus, 1976). Other Catalan doctors in favour of contraception, such as Asunción Villatoro, assistant physician at Santa Cruz y San Pablo hospital in Barcelona and a key figure in the early family planning movement in Spain, also appeared in *La Vanguardia* after 1977 (Castillo García, 2010, p. 98).

Another category of experts, comprised of Catholic priests and theologians, appeared in every important article and round-table debate on the pill published in *ABC*. Both *ABC* and *Triunfo* provided space to representatives of the Church’s hierarchy and to lay Catholics who shared favourable views about the pill as a useful tool for emphasizing the importance of responsible parenthood, while in *La Vanguardia* the

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pill’s rejection as something unnatural and unacceptable in a Catholic marriage was a common refrain until the mid-1970s (Castillo García, 2010, pp. 83-87).

In a debate on the pill published in *ABC Madrid* on 9 June 1968 and prior to the publication of the Encyclical *Humane Vitae*, one of the participants, father José Luis Martín Descalzo (1930-1991), a journalist, poet, distinguished writer and the editor of *Blanco y Negro* magazine in the late 1970s (Jiménez Borreguero, 2011; Iglesias, 1980, p. 429) remarked:

I ask who is more fertile: a father who has three children and is able to look after them and educate them properly, or the same father who, after conceiving seven or eight children is obliged to get another job and has no time to take care of his family (Naranjo, 1968).<sup>3</sup>

Another priest, the psychologist and sexual therapist Enrique de la Fuente, who in the late 1970s was the secretary of a vicarage in a working class neighbourhood of Madrid (Vallecas) and responsible for the family orientation services in this diocese (de León Sotelo, 1978, p. 27), defended sexuality as a couple’s most perfect form of communication and criticised the rhythm method as ‘psychologically destructive’. He considered contraceptives, including the pill, to be “a form of defence for a woman,

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<sup>3</sup>The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* stated that the sexual acts of spouses could not exclude conception. In this sense and as pointed out by Tentler, 2004, p. 254, the rhythm method was authorised as the only acceptable contraceptive practice in Catholic marriages in which there were good reasons to avoid conception.

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who tends to be used in an instrumental manner due to the existence of a double sexual standard” (de León Sotelo, 1978, p. 27).

In *Triunfo* during the 1960s and early 1970s, nearly all the articles on the pill were signed by the Catholic theologian Enrique Miret Magdalena (1941-2009), a firm defender of contraception and the author of the first article published in the Spanish press after the pill came on the pharmaceutical market. Considered a left-wing revolutionary theologian (Enrique Miret, 2009), he was a long time collaborator of *Triunfo*’s section on religion and society.

The most striking feature of the debate on the contraceptive pill is that almost no women participated in it before 1975 and that the few who did were morally or religiously opposed to it. The lack of women’s voices in the Spanish press (see also Simelio Solá, 2006, pp. 40-41) corresponded neither with the increasing presence of women in public life and in the medical profession (Ortiz Gómez , 2007), nor with the interest of contemporary social researchers on ‘woman’ and family issues. Three books published in the 1960s focused on these questions and included, or were based on, surveys about people’s views on contraception. Those surveys suggested growing acceptance of contraceptive methods by women during the 1960’s (Del Campo, 1960, pp. 116-117; Sullerot 1966, pp. 330-341<sup>4</sup>; Campo Alange, 1967 pp. 184-185). One of the books was a translation of a publication by the French feminist sociologist Evelyn

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<sup>4</sup>The survey is an Appendix for the Spanish edition. It was conducted by the editor of the book series, Enrique Ruiz García.

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Sullerot, a founder of the family planning movement in France. Another book was authored by a team of eight professional Spanish women who formed part of the first women’s studies group of the country, the *Seminario de Estudios Sociológicos de la Mujer*.

However, women’s voices in the Spanish press, especially the daily press, were certainly biased until 1975 and the few women participants adopted conservative or sceptical standpoints on the pill for religious and medical reasons. For example, a letter published in *ABC* in 1966 by Carmen Pérez, an allegedly Spanish female reader, defended a conservative Catholic point of view in the debate on the legalization of contraceptives in France (Pérez, 1967). Similarly, María Vegas del Pino participated in a round table discussion on the pill in 1968 as ‘a mother’, yet remained largely silent in a debate dominated by the male participants: two doctors, a journalist and a priest (Naranjo, 1968). It’s also worth noting that the only female doctor cited in *ABC* and *Blanco y Negro*, Ana María Álvarez, was a member of the ultraconservative Opus Dei and opposed the use of oral contraception for religious reasons (“La doctora”, 1973). Similarly, in 1975 *La Vanguardia* published a letter by a female doctor who defended the conservative wing of the Church hierarchy’s view of contraception as ‘violating nature’ (Castillo García, 2010, p. 89).

The transition to democracy provoked something of an editorial breakthrough at *ABC*, where female journalists started to write on controversial women’s issues like single mothers or, later, family planning and female sexuality. In 1978, Trini de León Sotelo, the author of a rich and well-grounded report on family planning in Spain



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shortly after its decriminalization, offered an interesting critique of the discrepancies between the law prohibiting contraceptives and the social reality of the 1970s (de León Sotelo, 1978). However, she still relied on male experts: a doctor and a priest.

In *Triunfo*, female journalists had already started to write about the pill in foreign countries such as France or the UK by 1970 (Romi, 1970; Alia, 1970; Roig; Luzán, 1976; Luzán, 1977). The magazine also provided space to feminist journalists, such as Carmen Alcalde, who later became the editor of the magazine *Vindicación Feminista*. In a dossier on marriage, she denounced the “anti-pill crusades” that in conjunction with Spain’s discriminatory gender laws helped keep women closed “within the four walls of their homes” (Alcalde, 1971). After Franco’s death, other democratically inclined media, like the daily *El País*, not to mention the magazine *Vindicación Feminista* (1976-1979), joined *Triunfo* in defence of women’s right to contraception (Ortiz-Gómez & Ignaciuk, 2012; Rodríguez-Ocaña et al. 2012).

### **The main issue in *ABC* and *Blanco y Negro*: the debate on side effects**

The vast majority of articles and news printed in *ABC* and *Blanco y Negro*, both of which had the same publisher *Prensa Española*, was dedicated to the side effects of the pill. This was very similar to *La Vanguardia* (Castillo García 2011) and the media coverage in the late 1960s and ’70s in Germany, Britain, and the United States, where the initial emphasis on the potentially liberating effects of the pill was replaced by a more circumspect examination of the risks related to its consumption (Junod, 2007; Marks, 2001b; Watkins, 1998; Silies, 2010).

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In *ABC* and *Blanco y Negro*, the debate in the 1960s and early 1970s was dominated by the ‘risks’ to women’s health and the possible relationship between the pill and thrombosis, while in the mid and late 1970s the main focus was on the possibility that the pill caused cancer. This chronology closely tracked the international debate on the adverse effects of the pill. By the second half of the 1970s, these ‘risks’ had been studied by scientists and were increasingly represented as generally known and accepted ‘side effects’. In publications on the pill’s side effects, *ABC* and *Blanco y Negro* relied on both international experts (often reprinting news provided by the official information agency Efe which until 1978 held a monopoly on international news in Spain) and Spanish doctors, for whom the adverse effects of oral contraceptives had become an important research topic by the late 1960s and 1970s (Rodríguez-Ocaña et al., 2012). In the specialised journals of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Spanish doctors, like their German counterparts, openly complained about the ways in which the pill was depicted in the newspapers, lamenting the publication of unverified and sensational reports (Silies, 2010, p. 208; Rodríguez-Ocaña et al., 2012).

The first known side effects of the pill, including nausea, breast tenderness, weight gain, and breakthrough bleeding, were reported during the first large-scale clinical trials performed on women in Puerto Rico and other countries (Marks, 2001b, pp. 96-106). Researchers and medical professionals likened these side effects to those experienced during early pregnancy and/or menstruation and underestimated them as being minor, temporary, or even psychosomatic symptoms (Watkins, 1998, p. 77; Marks, 2001a, p. 238). This interpretation was well represented in the pages of *ABC*.

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Professor Jean de Brux (1914-2007), a French pathologist and one of the pioneers of cytology in Europe in the 1950s (Jiménez-Alaya, 2008), affirmed in *ABC* that “(...) oral, muscular or local contraceptives do not cause any differences in tissues that would not appear in normal pregnancies” (“Dos conferencias,” 1972, p. 57). As Marks and Watkins have pointed out, the evaluation of these ‘minor’ side effects was generally dependent on a gender-biased concept of femininity that viewed pregnancy either as a natural or as a potentially hazardous condition for women (Marks, 2001a, p. 219; Watkins, 1998, p. 79). This bias also obstructed the study of other side effects, such as changes in libido or depression.

Although many of the formerly mentioned adverse effects were far from lethal, this was not the case for thrombosis, which dominated the debate on oral contraceptives in the late 1960s. Establishing a clear link between the oestrogen component of the pill and the risk of blood clots preoccupied researchers in the United States and Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. The first statistically significant research results came from British studies in the second half of the 1960s. These studies triggered concerns, especially about older contraceptive pills with higher doses of hormones, and caused their disappearance from the British and American market by the late 1970s (Junod, 2007, pp. 109-111).

In *ABC*, the risk of thrombosis received major coverage. The first reference to it was published in a news item on the death of a young American woman, supposedly due to thrombosis (Efe, 1967). While some publications emphasised the hazards and reported on the lethal consequences of the pill (Efe, 1967; Efe, 1971; García Marques,

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1971), others were more circumspect, either pointing to predisposing conditions like blood type or disregarded the consequences altogether (Efe, 1969; Gómez Santos, 1969; A similar lack of consensus is reflected in *La Vanguardia* (Castillo García, 2011, p. 80) Some articles that warned about thrombosis considered this risk similar to that of thrombosis during pregnancy. Doctor Juan Antonio Vallejo-Nájera (1926-1990), a professor of psychiatry at Complutense University in Madrid who participated as an expert in a round table on oral contraception in 1968, affirmed that “in a woman who is prone to cardiovascular disorders, the risks related to taking the pill would be [probably] much less than having four or five children in a row” (Naranjo, 1968, p. 141). The same arguments continued to be used in the following decade. In a wide-ranging report on the pill published in *Blanco y Negro* in 1976, its author, Santiago Loren (1918-2010), a physician, writer, and director of the maternity ward in the Provincial Hospital of Zaragoza (Pérez Gil, 2010), concluded that thrombosis was not so much a side effect, but rather ‘a complication’ that required further study: “to ban the pill because it can induce thrombosis or embolism is the equivalent of banning pregnancies and for the same reason” (Loren, 1976). In 1978, the subtitle of a report on family planning read “pregnancy and labour cause more deaths than oral contraceptives” (De León Sotelo, 1978, p. 24).

While the risk of thrombosis remained an issue in the general press, articles that either emphasized or downplayed the carcinogenicity of the pill started to appear in the Spanish media from the early 1970s. An article published in 1972 in *Blanco y Negro* presented three different medical opinions on the links between oral contraceptives and

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cancer. An article published in 1972 in *Blanco y Negro* presented three different medical opinions on the links between oral contraceptives and cancer. While one British doctor Thomas Nicol, emphasised the rejuvenating effects of oestrogen, Dr. José Luis Rodríguez Candela, who was the president of Gregorio Marañón’s Institute at the Spanish National Research Council (*CSIC*), refrained from formulating any conclusive opinions and called for further studies. Concurrently and by contrast, Professor Botella Llusía claimed that oestrogen was a carcinogen (Muñoz Atienza, 1972). Again in 1973, a short notice citing a certain professor from Oxford University named ‘Richard Doc’ – most likely Sir Richard Doll (1912-2005), Britain’s most famous epidemiologist – stated that “fears that the contraceptive pill causes cancer are unjustified. Moreover, women who take it may be protected against breast cancer” (Efe, 1973).

In 1977, however, the press began warning about the risk of cervical cancer:

USING THE PILL, THERE IS A RISK OF CANCER. According to the opinion of different medical professionals and as published in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the prolonged use of oral contraceptives can significantly increase the risk of cervical cancer in women prone to this type of illness (“Usando la píldora”, 1977).

Another important aspect of the debate on the pill was the repeated plea to use it under medical surveillance. The paternalistic discourse that discourages individuals’ involvement in treatment decision-making is a characteristic of the way prescription medicine is represented in the mass media (Prosser 2012) and reinforces the privileged

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position of doctors in relation to their female patients. The medical control of oral contraception seems to have been not just a technical matter, but also a moral one. This was especially the case in the early 1970s when many doctors, especially Botella Llusía, expressed in different media their concerns about hormonal contraception and the threat it posed to the survival of the human race (Castillo García, 2011, p. 92; Ignaciuk et al. 2012).

However, in the late 1970s in *ABC* and in *Blanco y Negro*, the doctor’s role had already shifted from being a moral guide on family planning to a medical counsellor whose obligation was to help couples plan the spacing of their children using suitable contraceptive methods. By this time, a new argument in favour of contraception appeared in both newspapers: access to the pill and other contraceptives would reduce and prevent abortions (Efe, 1978; Sáiz-Pardo Rubio, 1978). This classic argument, frequently used by twentieth century birth control and family planning campaigners, was also deployed to encourage Spanish gynaecologists to incorporate contraception into their medical practice (Cónill Serra, 1974). After 1978, when some contraceptive methods were decriminalised and the focus of the feminist movement turned to the legalisation of abortion, the discourse persisted. One of the most persuasive slogans of the Spanish feminist movement was: “[we claim] contraceptives in order not to have abortions, [and] abortions in order to stay alive [and not die from an illegal abortion]” (*anticonceptivos para no abortar, aborto para no morir*) (Ortiz-Gómez & Ignaciuk, 2010).

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### **The main issue in *Triunfo*: the pill as “responsible parenthood” and the right to family planning**

During the second half of the 1960s and into the 1970s, opinion articles published in *Triunfo* promoted a positive image of the pill and presented oral contraceptives as a useful tool for controlling procreation amongst married Catholic couples. Enrique Miret Magdalena published several articles on the pill from 1964 to 1976 in the magazine’s section devoted to religion and society, always defending it as a legitimate contraceptive method. He always defended the pill and interpreted it as a legitimate contraceptive method in the spirit of the concept of “responsible parenthood” introduced in the early 1960s by the Second Vatican Council (Miret Magdalena, 1964). After the announcement of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and its admonition to Catholic couples against all “artificial” contraceptive methods, Miret Magdalena continued to defend the pill and couples’ right to decide which contraceptive methods they would use to manage their family size. Augmenting the impact of this own arguments, he pointed to other prominent pro-pill Catholics such as John Rock or Bernard Haering. According to this theologian, *Humanae Vitae* was to be treated as a guide rather than a binding law for Catholics (Miret Magdalena, 1969, 1976). Miret Magdalena also criticized the Church’s contraceptive recommendations, such as the rhythm method, and defended the pill as a “natural” contraceptive because it imitated natural cycles and segregations of the human body (Miret Magdalena, 1964, 1969, 1972).

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The side effects of the pill, especially thrombosis, were also addressed following the publication of technical documents such as the Dunlop Committee Report and subsequent debates on oral contraceptives in France, the UK, and the USA. The female journalists who authored these articles presented the new data on side effects, weighing it against the opinions of experts who favoured this contraceptive method (Alia, 1970; Romi, 1970).

After Franco’s death, articles in favour of the legalization of family planning started to be published. They stressed the social reality of the pill’s use and the need for the state to legalize contraception and provide family planning services (Dexeus, 1976; Valtueña & Valtueña Maestre, 1976; “La píldora” 1977). The female journalists Montserrat Roig and Julia Luzán reported on round table debates on contraception and family planning that were organized by *Triunfo* and that hosted not just doctors (including women), but also feminist gynaecologists and activists (Roig, 1976; Luzán, 1977).

### **Conclusions**

The periodic appearance in Spanish newspapers of articles and news dealing with the pill, at a time when it was illegal, demonstrates the existence of a public debate on oral contraception as early as the second half of the 1960s. The debate transpired in the daily press and in opinion magazines critical of the regime. While most newspapers focused more on the technical aspects of the pill and adopted an ambivalent stance, in



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*Triunfo*’s pages the broader social and moral implications were discussed and a positive evaluation of this contraceptive method was promoted.

Debates during the late 1960s and early 1970s point to a slow but inevitable normalization of contraceptive practices among Spaniards, particularly with regard to oral contraception. At the beginning of the transition to democracy from 1975 to 1978, when contraception was being intensely discussed and ultimately decriminalised, the amount of news coverage increased greatly and the pill was discussed in a more open political climate in all the newsprint media.

The frequent references to foreign studies and practices suggest the existence of a vibrant interest in international debates about the pill, especially about its safety, which was widely discussed in the daily press. Focusing on the side-effects of the pill was a relatively safe approach for *ABC* and other newspapers to adopt as long as contraceptive propaganda remained criminalized. News reports contributed to the circulation of knowledge about the existence and properties of the pill, even as some of them tried to discourage women from taking it or to influence their perception of its putative dangers.

Press debates about the pill under Franco were far from homogenous. While some newspapers such as *ABC* stressed the technical aspects of the drug, others like *La Vanguardia* devoted more space to moral, social, and religious questions. The religious and moral discourse of Catholic doctors, theologians, and priests was evident in newspapers and magazines, but overall it was not as conservative as one might expect

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given the particularities of the socio-political context from which it emerged. *Triunfo*, *ABC*, and *Blanco y Negro* devoted space to theologians and priests who consistently defended the pill as a legitimate contraceptive method for Catholic couples. Women’s voices were less prominent in the daily press and *Blanco y Negro* than in an opinion magazine like *Triunfo*. While male medical experts dominated debate in the former, *Triunfo* opened its pages to female doctors and to feminist activists promoting family planning in the early 1970s.

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