On 31 December 2010, the National Museum of American History’s blog, *O Say Can You See*, featured a list of the top ten most popular original blog posts from the year. At number six—behind a post about the 1906 earthquake but ahead of one on why visitors cannot photograph the flag that inspired “The Star-Spangled Banner”—was the entry on the museum’s exhibit *Better Than Nature: The Pill*. This blog post was published in February 2010 in anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s approval of Enovid, the first contraceptive pill marketed in the United States. In this post, Division of Science and Medicine intern Amanda Chau enthusiastically described her work cataloging pills for this section of the museum’s larger *Science in American Life* exhibit. When she told her friends what she was doing at the Smithsonian, the most common response she got was, “Wait, you’re on birth control?” After correcting them, she would say enthusiastically, “You know, it’s the 50th anniversary of the Pill. Big stuff!”

The National Museum of American History was not the only museum to consider the Pill’s fiftieth anniversary “big stuff”: various medical museums around the country created exhibits to commemorate this event. The Pill’s fiftieth anniversary is an example of what historian of science Pnina Abir-Am calls a “commemorative mania” that has swept the world in the past few decades. During 2012 alone, there were celebrations of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, the bicentennial of the birth of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the one hundredth anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, to name just a few. As a result of these commemorative practices, says Abir-Am, the relationship between memory and historical writ-
ing has become “a major element of both scholarly and public discourse in the twenty-first century.” Indeed, says Abir-Am, scholarly writing on memory has become a subdiscipline in its own right—there is even an interdisciplinary journal, History and Memory (founded in 1989), dedicated to this historical subfield.\(^2\)

The *O Say Can You See* blog post mentioned above is a useful entry point for considering the ways in which the internet has complicated how the history of technology is conveyed to the public. Until recently, television, radio, and print media were the main sources of information on science and technology for the general public.\(^3\) Today, many museums use blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr Commons as “virtual spaces” in which to engage with their audiences.\(^4\) In addition, the World Wide Web has become a site for groups with varying political agendas to display their own interpretations of historical events. For the Pill’s fiftieth anniversary, Planned Parenthood created a digital exhibit and collecting site, *The Pill Is Personal*, while the pharmaceutical company Bayer created a Facebook page celebrating “fifty years of women’s empowerment.”\(^5\)

This essay will use coverage of the fiftieth anniversary of the Pill as an example of what Richard Hirsh describes as the “real world” role of historians of technology. “Because the profession of the history of technology emphasizes the importance of the social construction of technology,” Hirsh argues, “its practitioners may have special qualifications to help people who shape technically oriented policy.”\(^6\) The Pill is especially suited to this endeavor because, as the most popular form of reversible birth control, it has touched the lives of millions of Americans. Thus, an exploration of how the Pill’s fiftieth anniversary was covered illustrates how historians can use their expertise to provide a nuanced interpretation of a technology that is personally meaningful to a wide swath of the American public.

What is notable about the *O Say Can You See* blog post on the Pill mentioned above is that it makes no mention of the controversy generated by the *Science in American Life* (*SAL*) exhibit when it first opened in 1994. The concept for the exhibit originated in the late 1980s when the American Chemical Society (ACS) offered to fund a science display at the Smithsonian. According to head curator Arthur Molella, the ACS hoped to use the exhibit to rehabilitate their public image, “which they felt had been unjustly stigmatized by environmental critics.” The organization “chose the Smithsonian for its public visibility, hefty attendance, and cultural prestige.”

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Although ACS hoped to use the exhibit as a public-relations tool, “the exhibition contract they signed with the Smithsonian ultimately deferred to scholarly standards and gave the Institution final content authority, as required in all such Smithsonian agreements.” Drawing on the latest scholarship in the history of science and technology, the exhibit’s curators provided a complex view of the relationship between science and society. The Pill exhibit was part of the section on post–World War II science titled “Better Than Nature (1950–1970)” that both celebrated the technological marvels of the era while also displaying the dark side of scientific progress through such troubling artifacts as a family fallout shelter and Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, which exposed the environmental hazards of pesticides. The section on the Pill included Barbara Seaman’s exposé on the health risks associated with hormonal contraception, *The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill* (1969). Although a visitor study showed that “the public who came to SAL held science and technology in high regard, and continued to feel positive after viewing the exhibition,” critics accused the museum of advancing an “anti-science” agenda. Consequently, the outcry from scientists on SAL made the Smithsonian ground zero in the “science wars” of the 1990s.

During the fiftieth anniversary of the Pill, scientists tried to reclaim the history of the drug from historians and archivists and use it as an exemplar of scientific progress. Malcolm Potts, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Stanford, likened the Pill to a “genuine philosopher’s stone” long sought after by medieval chemists and, more recently, Harry Potter. As a young physician in Britain, Potts knew the scientists who had developed the Pill and began prescribing it during the early 1960s. Potts recalled, “I saw how they [prescriptions for the Pill] gave women a freedom they’d never known. For the first time in history, women could choose if and when to have a child with relative ease.” Potts acknowledged that during the 1960s, legitimate concerns about the safety of the Pill arose: “The early oral contraceptives had much higher doses of hormones than are used today, and there were deaths from blood clotting. The dangers hit the headlines.” Since then, Potts observed, the chemical composition of the Pill had changed, and the health benefits of taking the Pill have been clearly demonstrated. “This does not mean that the pill is safe for everyone, and certainly women who smoke and are over age 35 should not use the method,” Potts warned. On the whole, however, “We can say with unprecedented confi-

7. Barbara Seaman, *The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill*.
Pharmaceutical companies contributed to this triumphalist narrative of the Pill’s history. Teva Pharmaceuticals held a fiftieth birthday bash for the Pill, complete with an enormous birthday cake decorated with the lettering “one small pill. one giant leap for womankind. one monumental moment in history.” Kelli Conlin, president of the National Institute for Reproductive Health, declared, “The Pill created the most profound change in human history. . . . Today, we operate on a simple premise—that every little girl should be able to grow up to be anything she wants, and she can only do so if she has the ability to chart her own reproductive destiny.” Alexander Sanger, the grandson of Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger, received an “honorable mention” award. Numerous female celebrities testified about the wonders of the Pill. Mistress of ceremonies Cybill Shepherd asked, “Can you imagine how different my life would have been if I hadn’t gotten the Pill?” She then handed the microphone to The Daily Show’s Samantha Bee, who raised a glass “to my tiny daily dose of freedom, and also estrogen and progesterone. A combination of the three, really.”

Women’s health activists, on the other hand, saw little to celebrate. On the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research’s blog re: Cycling, contributors objected to whitewashed presentations of the Pill’s history. Laura Wershler wrote that the Pill was far from being “a tremendous boost to women’s health. . . . Troublesome side effects, serious health concerns, and a growing interest in holistic approaches to health care are putting the pill in its proper place. [The Pill is] [o]ne contraceptive choice that works for some women, some of the time.” The society’s president, Elizabeth Kissling, observed that in the midst of celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Pill, “we’ve neglected another anniversary: 2010 marks the 40th anniversary of U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson’s congressional hearings about the pill’s safety profile,” which were prompted by Barbara Seaman’s The Doctor’s Case Against the Pill:

Seaman’s book documented medical risks of the pill—such as blood clots, decreased sex drive, mood disorders and certain cancers, and she alleged that the pharmaceutical industry had suppressed such information. Sen. Nelson was investigating other allegations against the pharmaceutical industry and read Seaman’s book, which motivated him to take on the pill as well.

At the “Nelson hearings,” as they were soon called, “medical experts delivered testimony about the known risks of synthetic estrogen, one of the
main ingredients in birth control pills,” risks that women patients were rarely made aware of. Furthermore, women who used the Pill were excluded from the hearing agenda. “The only woman who testified was Dr. Elizabeth Connell, who expressed the fear that if dangers of the pill were publicized, women would give up birth control entirely. Connell said she worried that would lead to an explosion of unwanted pregnancies, or ‘Nelson babies.’”

Historians also challenged uncritical commemorations that framed the Pill as the equivalent of a moon landing for women’s health. In a Newsweek cover story, Elaine Tyler May deflated the claim that “the Pill provided the single biggest boost to women’s health and well-being in the 20th century.” She said that “at least two other major developments transformed women’s lives to an even greater degree: a dramatic decline in maternal mortality because of better access to good prenatal care, and greater educational and employment opportunities.” May argued that the feminist movement was responsible for these critical changes: “Without that . . . there would not have been pressure to improve the lives and the health care of mothers and all women, there would not have been the opportunities for education that women’s rights advocates insisted on.”

Religious opponents of birth control seized this continued feminist criticism of the Pill’s troubled legacy to strengthen their case against contraception. Historically, religious conservatives had blamed the Pill for declining moral standards. Pope Benedict XVI reiterated the words of the 1968 encyclical issued by his predecessor Paul VI and condemned the Pill for opening up “a wide and easy road . . . towards conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality.” Judie Brown of the American Life League contended that the Pill “this nation’s most popular recreational drug,” which reinforced “the idea that adultery and fornication could be a group sport.” The notion that the Pill led to “rampant promiscuity” and the decline of the institution of marriage even came from unexpected sources: film star Raquel Welch claimed that the most “significant and enduring” effect of the Pill’s creation was that women “could now have sex without any consequences.” Thus the “cornerstone of civilization”—marriage—was becoming increasingly unnecessary for most people. Welch concluded: “If an aging sex symbol like me starts waving the red flag of caution over how low moral standards have plummeted, you know it’s gotta be pretty bad.”

On top of these moral objections, religious opponents of contraception

appropriated warnings about the health risks of the Pill raised by feminist health activists, claiming the Pill “killed” women and their “preborn” babies. In 2010, religious conservatives also incorporated scientific findings from the environmental movement. During their annual “protest the pill” day, the American Life League linked the checkered history of the pill with another celebration—the fortieth anniversary of the first Earth Day in 1970. Carefully sidestepping the environmental movement’s support of birth control as a way to defuse the “population bomb,” the American Life League seized on scientific studies that documented the presence of estrogenic compounds in waterways and drinking water and their potential harm to human health or aquatic life. While in previous years the American Life League had decried the negative health consequences of the Pill for women and fetuses, the 2010 demonstration claimed the Pill “kills the environment” by filling the nation’s water supply with artificial hormones excreted by women on the Pill. The League pointed to scientific evidence that alleged that these contaminants were the chief cause of “strange intersex fish”—male fish with female reproductive organs—that had appeared in the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. These claims by religious conservatives received such widespread attention that they were mocked by comedian Stephen Colbert, who warned of the threats of birth-control tainted “ladypee” on his faux conservative talk show, The Colbert Report, on Comedy Central.

Feminist health activists condemned religious conservatives’ misappropriation of their work on behalf of women’s health and safety. Elizabeth Kissling observed that feminist actions at the Nelson hearings were significant not only because they pointed out the dangers of the Pill, but also “gave birth to the women’s health movement.” Alice Wolfson and other members of DC Women’s Liberation “discovered they all had experienced negative side effects of the pill, which their physicians had not warned them about.” This revelation led them to attend the Nelson hearings to give comments about their personal experience with the Pill. “When Sen. Gaylord refused to recognize them, they began shouting their questions. ‘Why weren’t we told about side effects? Why aren’t any women testifying? Why are you letting the drug companies murder us for their profit and convenience?’” The demonstration caught the attention of reporters “and a movement was born. Seaman and Wolfson met during one of the breaks in testimony and eventually worked together to create the National Women’s Health Network—still a vibrant and vital advocacy organization for women’s health.” As Wolfson recalled in her memoir, “We went to the Hill to get information. We left having started a social movement.” Kissling shows that it was

women’s activism that led to safer formulations for the Pill, as well as the patient package insert that provided full information about the drug’s risks, ingredients, and side effects.18

Historians of contraception contributed to this effort to reclaim feminist history from religious conservatives while also introducing popular readers to more nuanced scholarship on the history of the 1960s. In a Mother’s Day editorial in the Washington Post, Elaine Tyler May instructed readers to

[forget the single girl and the sexual revolution. The pill was not anti-mother; it was for mothers. And it changed motherhood more than it changed anything else. Its great accomplishment was not in preventing motherhood, but in making it better by allowing women to have children on their own terms.

When the Pill hit the market, it was “at the peak of the baby boom, [and] it was overwhelmingly mothers who rushed to get it. There may have been hand-wringing in some quarters—and celebrating in others—about a ‘sexual revolution,’ but the pill had very little to do with it. Single women had a difficult time getting prescriptions.” In some states, it was illegal for physicians to prescribe birth control or even give advice on contraception to anyone, married or single. Pete Seeger’s 1966 song about the Pill “looked on it not as a boost to the sexual revolution but as a boon to mothers,” since it told “the story of a Catholic mother with a house full of children, waiting for the pope to ‘bless the pill . . . before my man comes in.’” A decade later, country singer Loretta Lynn’s ode to the Pill “also focused on how it had liberated mothers. . . . Thanks to the pill, she sings, she’s giving up her maternity clothes for miniskirts, hot pants and good times. She also promises him sexual bliss, because without the fear of pregnancy, ‘the feelin’ good comes easy now.’ She reassures him, ‘Oh Daddy don’t you worry none ’cause Mama’s got the pill.’”19

Elizabeth Watkins also criticized oversimplified historical accounts that conflated the Pill and images from the Summer of Love. According to Watkins, this was “a media construct that was very easy to make because the Pill is such an iconic little symbol and it looks nice on magazine feature covers and it was this sort of single object that social and cultural commentators could point to as something that had changed between the Fifties and the Sixties.” Alan Petigny observed that the so-called sexual revolution began well before the 1960s: between 1940 and 1960, “the period where the received narrative insists the sexual revolution had not yet unfolded, there was more than a threefold increase in the level of single motherhood or the level of illegitimacy.” Margaret Marsh and Wanda Ronner, who wrote a

19. Elaine Tyler May, “Mother’s Other Little Helper.”
biography of Catholic physician John Rock, observed that Rock was interested in enhancing marital happiness, not destroying marriage. Andrea Tone added, “It’s not that a technology changes everything,” she said. “It’s how people reacted to the technology. Other forces—political, cultural, religious and medical—shaped how the pill was perceived and used.” Contradicting the charge that the Pill ignited the sexual revolution, Tone pointed out that Alfred Kinsey’s reports on human sexual behavior found that dramatic changes in premarital sexual activity were well underway by the late 1940s.

Women’s health activists did not ignore scientific progress, but used the Pill’s fiftieth anniversary as a way to remind the public of their decades of work on behalf of women’s health and consumer protection. In an article in the Women’s Health Activist Newsletter, the National Women’s Health Network recognized that the modern Pill was safer than its predecessors largely because of the work of NWHN and other women’s health organizations. “Happy 50th, Pills!” the article declared. “You have really arrived in the world. Not only are you 50 years old, but many, many versions of you have come about in the last half century, and you’ve gotten better with age.”

Some feminist health activists even used this notion of a “half century of progress” to argue that the Pill should be “liberated” from the prescription. Kelly Blanchard, president of Ibis Reproductive Health, a nonprofit research organization, pointed to fifty years of scientific evidence that proved the Pill met the FDA criteria for over-the-counter medications. “Women don’t need a doctor to tell them whether they need the pill—they know when they are sexually active and want to avoid pregnancy. Pill instructions are easy to follow: Take one each day. There’s no chance of becoming addicted. Taking too many will make you nauseated, but won’t endanger your life, in contrast to some over-the-counter drugs, like analgesics.” There were beneficial side effects to taking the pill, “like reduced risks of ovarian and uterine cancer.” Blanchard concluded, “Women don’t need a doctor to tell them if they need cold medicine or condoms, and they shouldn’t need a doctor’s permission to take the pill. Over-the-counter sales would expand access to safe, effective contraception, and help women take control over their sexual and reproductive lives.”

To promote this effort, Blanchard and other reproductive health experts formed the Oral Contraceptives Over-the-Counter Working Group “to explore the potential of over-the-counter access to oral contraceptives to reduce disparities in reproductive health care access and outcomes, and to increase opportunities for women to access a safe, effective method of contraception, free of

20. “The Pill Is Turning 50 This Weekend.”
unnecessary control, as part of a healthy sexual and reproductive life.”

For these women’s health activists, the empowering potential of the Pill could not be met without first freeing this contraceptive from the prescription.

The celebrations of the Pill’s fiftieth anniversary illustrate key issues in the commemoration of controversial events in the history of science, technology, and medicine in the United States. For the scientists who developed and tested the first contraceptive pills, the anniversary of the Pill was a way to affirm their collective professional past, as well as to reassert their professional authority in the present. Religious conservatives selectively used scientific evidence to shore up their defense of traditional gender roles and heterosexual marriage. Feminist health activists framed the fiftieth anniversary of the Pill as a watershed in the history of the modern women’s health movement. They reminded audiences that feminist health activism played a central role in making sure that the Pill got “better with age.” At the same time, they demonstrated the ongoing relevance of feminist health activism in ensuring product safety and better access to contraception.

Finally, this episode provides an example of the public role of historians of technology. During the commemoration of the Pill’s fiftieth anniversary, historians of technology corrected distortions about the historical impact of the Pill. Although the 2010 celebration is past, abuse of the Pill’s history continues. The 2012 elections and the attendant “War on Women” demonstrated how easily misinformation about contraception could be twisted to serve political ends. As Marjorie Kruvand observed in her analysis of fifty years of coverage of the Pill in the *New York Times*, “the pill has remained a persistent flash point for public and political discourse about conception and contraception, sexuality and morality, and health and safety. Debates have played out in the news media as well as in doctors’ offices, courtrooms, school board meetings, houses of worship, government agencies, Congress, and state legislatures.” Historians of technology need to be part of these disputes so that they can continue to dispel myths about this highly contested technology.

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