



Drugs in the Australian news media: Trends and impacts on youth attitudes to illicit drug use

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Rationale

Society is constantly bombarded with mass media messages by way of television, radio, newspapers and online. News outlets have limited space to dedicate to issues, but illicit drugs are clearly newsworthy. In spite of the media being identified almost ten years ago as a “new battleground” for the alcohol and other drug sector (Proctor and Babor 2001), knowledge remains scant on the nature of news media reporting in Australia - how much space is devoted to drugs, how issues are framed, who speaks and who does not.

Even less is known about the impacts of news media on attitudes towards drugs, particularly on those who are most likely to use illicit drugs - youth. Other fields have demonstrated that media reporting related to violence, body image and tobacco smoking *can* have a potentially powerful and even dangerous influence upon attitudes and behaviour (see for example Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Rowell Huesmann, Johnson, Linz, Malamuth and Wartella 2003). We also know that, common assumptions aside, youth remain active consumers of traditional news media such as newspapers and television news (Essential Research 2010; Hughes, Spicer, Lancaster, Matthew-Simmons and Dillon 2010).

The question remains, how and to what extent can news media messages on illicit drugs influence youth attitudes towards (or demand for) illicit drug use? Can, for example, media messages *increase* the likelihood of illicit drug

use? Conversely, can it *reduce* the likelihood of illicit drug use? And, how important is the *framing* of media messages (e.g. a criminal justice vs. a health issue).

Understanding the role of the media is becoming ever more pertinent due to the ever increasing volume and types of media in modern society (Cunningham and Turner 2010). This project starts to address the intersection between media and illicit drug use by examining two major aspects of news media: media production – as denoted by patterns and trends in Australian news media reporting on illicit drugs – and media effects – as denoted by impacts on youth attitudes to illicit drug use. An overview of the core findings is provided herein.

Aims and objectives of the project

The purpose of the project was fourfold:

1. To identify the dominant media portrayals used to denote illicit drugs in Australian news media (across and within drug types);
2. To identify the extent to which media portrayals changed over time (from 2003-2008);
3. To explore the impact of different media portrayals on youth attitudes to illicit drug use; and
4. To determine if the media differentially affects sub-populations of youth.

For the purposes of this study, the term ‘media’ was used to describe mainstream print news and current affairs, and not advertising or social marketing campaigns.

Methodology

A three part method was adopted. First, a retrospective media content analysis was conducted of newspaper reporting over the period from 2003 to 2008. A total of 4,397 newspaper articles were coded on multiple elements of framing including topic, source and implied moral evaluation of illicit drug use. Second, a national online ‘drug media survey’ was developed that included a randomised series of eight different media portrayals (denoting the



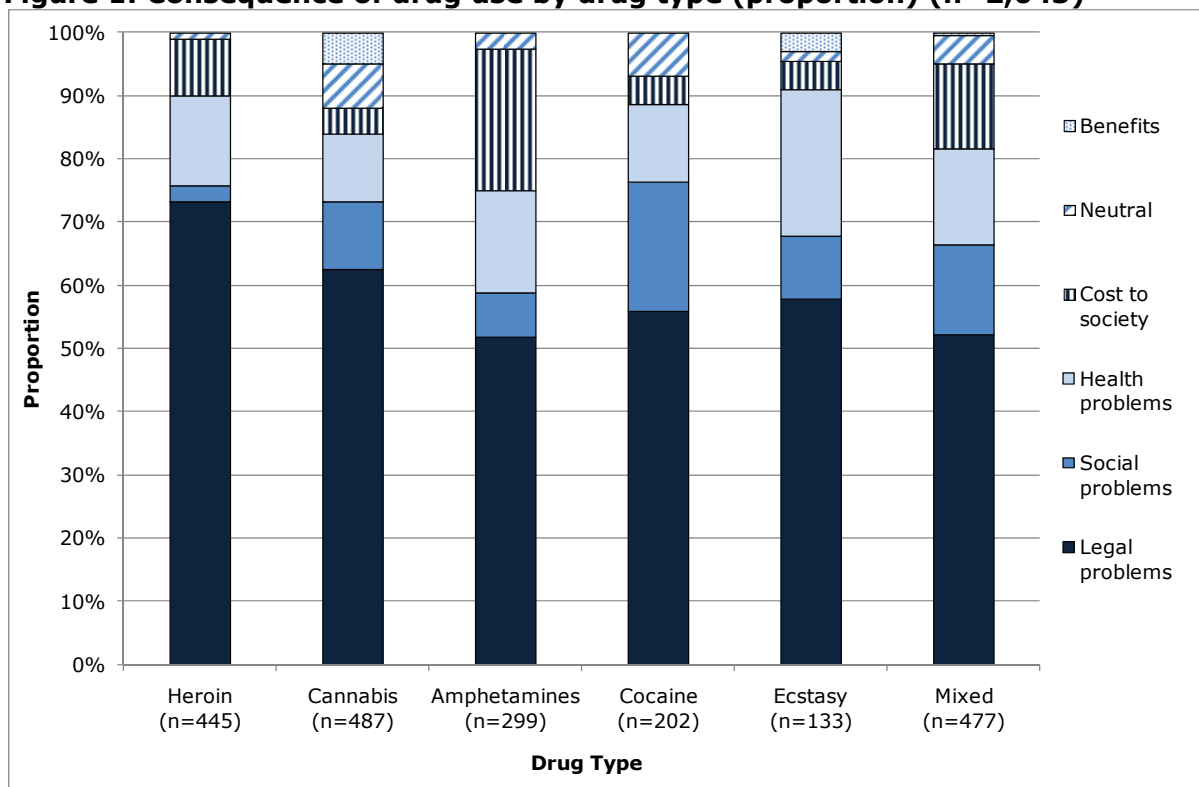
two most commonly used illicit drugs – cannabis and ecstasy). Portrayals were drawn from newspapers, yet these portrayals could have appeared in any news media form e.g. online news or radio. A total of 2,296 youth aged 16-24 years completed the survey and reported the impact of each portrayal on their perception of the risk and acceptability of illicit drug use, and their likelihood of future use. Finally, the nature of media effects was also explored using focus groups with 52 youth aged 16-24 years.

Key findings

The media analysis demonstrated that the dominant portrayals regarding illicit drug issues in the Australian print media tend to focus on heroin or cannabis (with 27.0% and 24.5% respectively of the sample) and rarely on ecstasy (4.9% of the sample). Despite fears that positive portrayals of drugs in the media may encourage or peak interest in drug use, the sample showed that articles with a “good” moral evaluation of drugs¹ were extremely rare and accounted for only 1.9% of the sample. Most articles were written with a neutral overall tone (83.5%). The dominant portrayals depicted law enforcement or criminal justice action, and emphasised the legal problems associated with drugs/use. For example, criminal justice action regarding users or dealers amounted to 55.2% of articles within the sample.

The media portrayals differed somewhat over time and between drug types. Heroin articles were the most narrowly framed, predominantly indicating legal problems associated with use. In contrast, ecstasy and amphetamine articles were more likely to emphasise negative health consequences and costs to society respectively (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Consequence of drug use by drug type (proportion) (n=2,043)

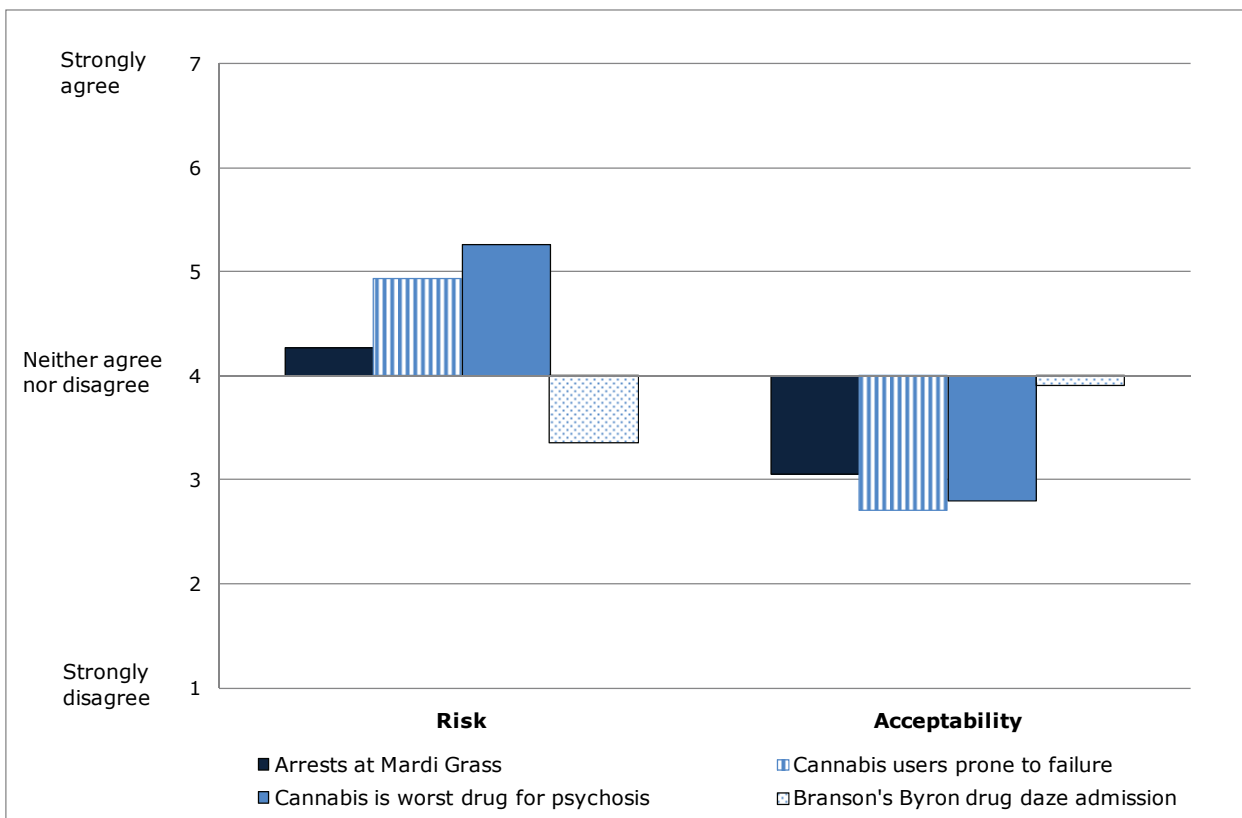


¹ Articles where drugs are portrayed as a rite of passage, have no or minimal risk or are fun or beneficial.



The survey indicated that news media reporting was capable of eliciting at least short term effects on youth attitudes to illicit drug use. The vast majority of the media portrayals affected the overall sample of youth in an “anti-drug” manner: that is, they increased perceptions of risk, reduced perceptions of acceptability, and reduced the reported likelihood of future drug use. The type of portrayal affected both the size and direction of impact (see Figure 2). Portrayals *endorsing* drug use (such as an article about Sir Richard Branson’s cannabis use) tended to increase “pro-drug” attitudes. Conversely, negative portrayals (such as an article about the link between cannabis use and psychosis) tended to reduce “pro-drug” attitudes. The most effective portrayals for reducing pro-drug attitudes were the health and social portrayals. These were more effective than the dominant crime and arrest portrayals.

Figure 2: Extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement “this article makes me think illicit drug use is risky/acceptable,” by cannabis article (mean response)



Media effects were not-uniform. Those most affected were females (compared to males), non users (compared to recent users and non-recent users), and those who described themselves as less interested in/susceptible to drug use. The focus groups confirmed that youth actively discern and accept or reject media messages on illicit drugs. This process is shaped by media literacy skills, pre-existing beliefs and message framing. Youth are more likely to accept messages that are deemed credible (e.g. use evidence appropriately, cite expert sources and use a neutral tone). They are also more likely to accept messages that are deemed *meaningful*. Health and social portrayals tend to be more powerful because they depict a more persuasive risk message. These portrayals also appear capable of affecting multiple sub-populations of youth as they elicit a preventative message to non-users and a harm reduction message to recent and non-recent users.



Implications for policy

The findings indicate that the way in which news media *frames* illicit drugs matters. Portrayals in the press are *not* random and often over-represent criminal justice or legal problem framings. Framing affects what is said about issues, by whom and the definition of optimum solutions (Lancaster, Hughes, Spicer, Matthew-Simmons and Dillon 2010). The current frames are likely to restrict opportunities for alternate debates. That said, frames do differ somewhat between drugs and can shift with changing agendas and events. Establishing how alternate frames emerge is of critical importance for fostering more informed debate.

This study provides evidence of the potential power of news media over attitudes towards illicit drug use. While exploratory, the findings suggest that news media *may* be one of the many factors that effects demand for illicit drugs, and that, in the main, news media is likely to be deterring interest in and/or the uptake of illicit drug use. We believe this to be a factor that many, including the alcohol and other drug sector, have overlooked.

The anomaly is that the portrayals that were deemed *most* likely to deter youth, such as those denoting cannabis psychosis, are currently the least covered in Australian news media (at least as measured in print news). This leads us to conclude, albeit with some caution, that the capacity to use news media to deter or dissuade youth is currently being under-utilised.

The onus is now on the alcohol and other drug sector to recognise the potential power of the news media and to build a culture of media engagement, increase resourcing capabilities and develop more strategic targeting related to illicit drug issues. We suggest such investment is likely to pay dividends, because as summed up by one young Australian: "Media is probably one of the few ways that prevention message(s) can keep being pushed."

To see the full report go to "Media reporting on illicit drugs in Australia: Trends and impacts on youth attitudes to illicit drug use" at <http://www.dpmp.unsw.edu.au>

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