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Keywords

Newspaper, coverage, drug, policy, analysis, pre, election, reporting, Greens, drug, policy, Australia

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Newspaper coverage of drug policy: an analysis of pre-election reporting of the Greens' drug policy in Australia

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Abstract

Introduction and Aims. With the headline 'Ecstasy Over The Counter' in a popular daily newspaper, the debate on drug policy officially entered the arena of the 2003 New South Wales (Australia) State Election. The debate resurfaced in the lead-up to the 2004 Australian Federal Election. This paper analyses the pre-election coverage of drug policy issues in four Australian newspapers. **Design and Methods.** Four high-circulation daily newspapers were monitored for a one-month period prior to both elections and analysed for their coverage of drug policy, particularly with respect to the policy of the Greens. **Results.** The newspapers took different perspectives on drug policy issues, with two framing it in emotive terms as a moral debate and two framing it as political manoeuvring. **Discussion and Conclusion.** The newspapers focused upon emotive and sensationalist factors. They did not provide their readers with information or a rationale for the formulation of drug policy, be this from a harm minimisation or zero tolerance perspective.

Key words: drug policy, elections, harm minimisation, newspapers, public opinion.

Introduction

There is a wide range of views on the correct approach to illicit drug use. In the health literature the two extremes are commonly referred to as 'zero tolerance' and 'harm minimisation' [1]. A corresponding distinction is made in the criminology literature, with the two approaches being termed 'criminology of the other' and 'criminology of the self' [2]. 'Zero tolerance' policy is based on the positioning of drug use as a moral and legal issue, with the individual viewed as weak-willed, self-indulgent and socially uncooperative [3,4]. The 'criminology of the other' similarly positions drugs and drug users as 'threats that need to be rooted out of our midst and to be punished with impressive ceremonies' [5]. It is from this perspective that policies and terminologies such as the 'war on drugs' emanate. Zero tolerance is the central tenet of drug policy in the United States, with the US Congress legislating in 1988 that the primary aim of the national drug policy was a Drug Free America by 1995. However, as Wodak pointed out in 1998, 'Three years after the deadline, the United States is anything but drug-free' [6].

'Harm minimisation', on the other hand, is based on the positioning of drug use as a health issue, with emphasis placed on limiting the harms associated with drug use for both the individual and the community. The 'criminology of the self' similarly recognises that the control of illicit drug use is not totally the responsibility of the state, and requires a more multifaceted approach—including community approaches to drug prevention and reducing the harms to drug users [5]. Harm minimisation ideologies work in a complementary fashion with abstinence-based ideals, motivated by the reality that not everyone using drugs, at any particular time, wants or feels able to stop. Policies such as the provision of safe injecting rooms, needle exchange programmes and decriminalisation of cannabis use are examples of

the harm minimisation approach. The development of harm minimisation drug strategies evolved in response to the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and the impact of the virus within the injecting drug community.

Australia's official drug policy and alternative policies of minor parties

Since April 1985, Australia has officially had a three-tiered national drug policy which aims first to reduce supply, mainly through enacting legislation and ongoing law enforcement; secondly to reduce demand through information delivery, education, treatment programmes and regulatory controls; and lastly to minimise the harms caused by drug use via harm reduction methodologies.

The core of the current federal drug policy, the National Illicit Drug Strategy [7] is influenced strongly by the 'zero tolerance' doctrine from the United States and is manifested through 'tough on drugs' rhetoric [8]. The shift away from a predominately harm reductionist drug policy, legislated initially by the federal government of Bob Hawke, occurred in August 1997 when Prime Minister John Howard vetoed a proposed ACT prescription heroin maintenance trial. Australia currently spends more than three-quarters of its allocated budget for drug strategies on supply reduction initiatives through law enforcement and border surveillance [9].

Within Australia two of the minor political parties, the Greens and the Australian Democrats, support a harm minimisation approach to illicit drug use. The Greens' current drug policy aims at providing regulation of illicit drugs through removing criminal sanctions associated with individual drug use and shifting the issue of substance use to a social and public health portfolio. By removing the criminal status associated with personal drug use, they argue that expenditure focused currently on law enforcement initiatives can be redirected into treatment options [10].

Opposition to the harm minimisation approach stems from the perception that the implementation of such a policy may lead to increases in drug use and, by implication, drug-related problems. The actual impact of decriminalisation of drug use, and related policies, has not been proved empirically to date. However, some studies have shown that decriminalisation of possession and use of cannabis does not increase cannabis use [11–13] and may in fact even decrease usage [14]. There is also some evidence that rates of other illicit drug use are higher in US states which prohibit cannabis use [15]. Further, decriminalisation of cannabis use reduces enforcement costs and provides substantial savings for the criminal justice system [12, 16].

Print media and drug policy

'How much and in what ways people receive political information from the mass media have been among the most important concerns in political communication' [17].

McQuail describes newspapers as the watchdog of democracy [18]. It has also been argued [5] that newspapers, and specifically their editorials, 'evaluate the importance of the discussions, arguments, and decisions uttered in the main arenas of society, make an assessment of them and of situations, and motivate decision-makers, authorities, and/or citizens . . . to act against the problems they have identified'.

The way in which political actions and motives are portrayed in the media—‘news framing’—influences the audience’s interpretation and evaluation of, and judgements on, political issues [19]. The way in which a single issue is framed may vary considerably between media, such as the difference between newspapers operating from different political perspectives or addressing different audiences [20]. The effect of such news framing is mediated by the audience’s pre-existing knowledge and beliefs on the particular issue [17,21]. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the media have a greater potential influence where people have a limited knowledge of the relevant issues (such as, for example, what ‘harm-minimisation’ actually means). Further, where an issue is open to different interpretations, there are a number of textual features of print media coverage which narrow the range of likely interpretation. One of the most obvious of these features is the headline, which ‘cues’ relevant ideas and concepts [22]. Other features which guide the reader as to which potential interpretations are relevant include metaphors, symbols and iconic phrases [23].

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the print media over-represents illicit drug use, particularly in terms of the representation of drug-related deaths compared to the actual mortality rates. For example, a review of mortality-related copy in US print media [24] found, in comparison to actual causes of death, that illicit drugs were over-represented by 1740%, motor vehicles by 1280%, toxic agents by 1070% and homicide by 733%; whereas tobacco use achieved only 23% of expected copy, heart disease only 33% and cerebrovascular disease only 31%. This has the effect of increasing the general public’s concern—and outrage—about illicit drug issues, often at the cost of reducing the focus on issues which have a greater impact on morbidity and mortality, such as alcohol consumption among young people. It has been shown that community concern about drug use is more related to increased mass media coverage than increased drug-related problems [24].

A study of Finnish newspapers’ positions on drug policy, which analysed newspaper editorials in five newspapers over the period 1993 – 2000 found that the papers did not present the perspectives of ‘restrictive policy’ and ‘harm-reduction policy’ as contrary, but as complementary [5] and were, in general, supportive of needle exchange programmes and treatment programmes. The opposite has been the case in Australia, with considerable media opposition to measures that have been shown to have positive health outcomes, such as needle exchange programmes. When more extreme measures are proposed the Australian media tends to react in a sensationalist fashion—for example, it has been argued that media vilification of the proposed Australian Capital Territory (ACT) heroin trial—designed to evaluate the efficacy of prescription heroin as a treatment for addicted individuals—was an important factor in the government’s decision not to proceed with the trial [25,26]. One author stated that even when journalists intend to support drug policy reform, the persistence with which certain ‘old’ metaphors and representations of heroin users are used does not support their case [27].

The Australian example illustrates that media coverage is not simply a by-product of policy initiatives [20,27]; the Australian print media often depict heroin use as a ‘problem of individual morality and responsibility’ [25] and marginalised other contributing factors. A study on representations of illegal drugs in general identified characteristic news frames of crime and deviance, contagion, societal and personal risk, drug locality and the related community threat and celebrity [28]. This paper presents an analysis of print media coverage of drug policy during the 2003 New South Wales State Election and the 2004 Federal Election, with particular emphasis on the media’s portrayal of the Greens’ policy.

Study 1. The 2003 New South Wales State Election

Methodology

Sydney print news media are restricted to two wide-selling daily newspapers. The *Daily Telegraph* (*DT*) is a tabloid, and frequently places more emphasis on news as entertainment than on factual coverage. This is achieved through the employment of an emotive and sensationalist reporting style. Currently, the *DT* has a daily circulation of 407,518, with 341,112 on Saturday and 734,152 on Sunday (29). In contrast, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*) is a broadsheet and is generally considered to cater to a more educated readership than the *DT*. Its emphasis in reportage is on news and editorial comment, and consequently issues are given a more thorough and comprehensive coverage. The current figures for the *SMH* circulation are 226,031 Monday – Friday and 392,143 for Saturday [30].

By using both a tabloid and broadsheet publication for specific information retrieval, an analyst can examine their content in relation to each newspaper's presentation of the relevant issue. While the distinction between tabloids and broadsheets is useful and has been made in previous research [24], this distinction does not imply different standards of journalistic practice.

Using the Lexis–Nexis database, a search of the *DT* and *SMH* was conducted for the period 22 February – 22 March 2003. A total of 15 articles on the Greens' drug policy were located in the *SMH* and 21 in the *DT* (excluding letters to the editor and daily election opinion polls). Details of the information retrieved has been tabulated and is available from the author.

Results

The Daily Telegraph. The *DT* commenced reporting on the issue with their front page 'investigative expose' on Sunday 2 March under the headline 'Ecstasy Over The Counter— Revealed: The Greens' Hidden Policy'. The article continued on pages 4 and 5 [31], and there was an accompanying opinion piece in the Features section [32]. The first article focused on the *DT*'s interpretation of the policy and included numerous emotive statements such as: 'drug users will escape penalty', 'ecstasy and speed would be freely available over the counter' and 'licensed drug outlets to import, manufacture and sell drugs'. The opinion piece was equally emotive, but focused more on the alleged secrecy surrounding the policy, with descriptors such as 'devious and systematic concealment', and concluded with a call for all Australians not to vote for the Greens at the upcoming election.

Coverage continued over the next 2 weeks, with ongoing references to drugs being made freely available. The Greens' drug policy was described as 'an unconscionable policy' [33] which would 'send us back to the dark ages' [34] and had caused a 'wave of outrage' [35] in the community.

At no stage did the *DT* present a rational discussion of the details of the Greens' drug policy, or the rationale behind it; nor did they provide figures to support their stance in the area of drug policy success or failure. Further, throughout the 2 weeks of fairly intensive coverage, they did not provide any explanation of the meaning of, or arguments for, harm minimisation.

Not surprisingly, given the information communicated to its readers, the *DT*'s 16 March article on the election polls reported that 'almost 3 in 4 voters said they opposed the policy' and that 36% were 'less likely to vote Green because of the policy' [36]. Interestingly, they

also reported that overall support for the Greens had increased, but they did not speculate whether this may have been indicative of some degree of support for the Greens' drug policy.

The Sydney Morning Herald. The *SMH* commenced reporting on the Greens' drug policy on Monday 3 March in a page 9 story with the headline 'Major Parties Can't Resist Lure Of Drug Issue' [37]. In this initial article the *SMH* framed the story in a political context, describing the issue as 'major parties tapping into community fears about drugs to score political points'.

From this initial article, and throughout the period of coverage, the *SMH* took a substantially different stance on the issue to the *DT* and focused on the party-politicking underlying the debate over the policy. This different perspective was evident in the placement of the stories: the first *DT* article appeared on the front page as a major news item, whereas the *SMH* article appeared considerably later in the paper. Overall, 13 of the 15 *SMH* articles approached reporting on the policy from the perspective of its impact within a pre-election environment, in contrast to only six of the 21 *DT* articles. The only *SMH* article that deviated substantially from this political perspective was an editorial column by Miranda Devine, who argued that the recent Australian 'heroin drought' was evidence of the effectiveness of zero tolerance drug policies [38].

The *SMH* was more objective in its reporting of comments from opposing politicians. Unlike the *DT* coverage, the more extreme adjectives in these politicians' statements were presented in quotation marks in the *SMH*; for example, they referred to the Coalition's description of the 'Greens' "soft" approach on drugs policy' [39] and the Liberal Party's 'attack on the Greens' "mad, bad, dangerous" drugs policy' [40].

Although the *SMH*'s coverage was more politically focused and less emotive than the *DT* coverage, it also failed to report the issues in depth and gave no coverage of the reasons and motivation behind harm minimisation strategies and substance treatment. Like the *DT*, the *SMH* reported the ongoing polls and discussed the impact of the drugs debate on the poll results. They reported that Greens had been faring extremely well in the polls 'despite controversy over the party's drug policy' [40].

Study 2. The 2004 Australian Federal Election

Methodology

This analysis is of two wide-selling daily newspapers in Melbourne. The *Herald Sun* (*HS*) is comparable with Sydney's *DT*, with emotive and sensationalist reporting. Currently, the *HS* is a very popular paper with a daily circulation of 551 000, 521 000 on Saturday and 600 000 on Sunday [41]. The other Melbourne paper, *The Age* (*TA*) is comparable with the *SMH*. The daily circulation figures for *TA* are 197 000 on Monday – Friday, 308 000 for Saturday and 191 500 for Sunday [48].

Using the Factiva database, a search of the *HS* and *TA* was conducted for the period 24 August – 24 September 2004 in the approach to the 9 October election. A total of nine articles on the Greens' drug policy were located in the *HS* and two in the *TA* (excluding letters to the editor and daily election opinion polls). A survey table is available from the authors.

Results

The Herald Sun. In a similar style to the *DT*'s reporting in 2003, the *HS* began its coverage on 31 August 2004 with two news articles. The first, 'Greens back illegal drugs. . .' [43] describes the Greens' policies as backing the supply of illicit drugs including ecstasy and heroin and then describes the morbidity and mortality resulting from ecstasy use in Australia. The article launches into extended criticism of the Greens and their policies using emotive language and quoting descriptions of the policies as 'loopy' and 'kooky'. The second article, entitled 'Dual policy on drugs' [44], describes the Greens as advocating 'a crackdown on legal and prescription drugs but a loosening up on illegal drugs'. The journalist presents the proposed decriminalisation of illegal drug-usage policies with suspicion and alarm, and then describes other Greens' policies regarding greater restriction of tobacco and alcohol promotion to highlight a seeming contradiction in their stance.

The Greens leader, Senator Bob Brown, responded to these initial *HS* articles with a media release [45], claiming that 'the *Herald Sun*'s Gerard McManus had misinformed readers in a way which indicates the Murdoch press has gone beyond critic to concoct false policy in its anti-Green bias'. However, the *HS* reported on Brown's response as 'Red-faced Brown backs off Greens' drug ideas' [46] and described Senator Brown as 'unaware of the Greens' own platform'. Towards the end of the article they quote the Senator's description of the policy as an attempt to move away from the current zero tolerance approach. They cite criticism of the Green's drug policy from other political leaders. Another article [47] describes condemnation by other industry and health groups. The latter article, while supporting a harm minimisation approach, describes these groups as critical of the proposed 'legalisation of social drugs such as ecstasy. . .'. The Greens' policy relating to social drugs according to their website actually states 'investigations of options for the regulated supply of social drugs such as ecstasy in controlled environments, where information will be available about health and other effects of drug use' [48].

The following weeks of *HS* coverage of the Green's drug policy, including opinion pieces, described the policy in sensational terms, warning Australians against voting Green and to be wary of preference deals that favour the Greens [49 – 52]. They commonly mocked the harm minimisation approach yet failed to provide a substantial analysis: 'our community should never close its mind to alternative treatments for serious addiction. . . but since when do you need a "controlled environment" for dispensing ecstasy'? [49]; and 'eye-catching prospect of drug decriminalisation' [51].

The Age. In a similar manner to the *SMH* reporting prior to the State Elections of 2003, the limited reporting of the Greens' drug policy in *TA* tended to focus on the party politicking underlying the issue. The first article, 'Greens on the boil over attacks' [53], described Liberal and National Party attacks on Green Party policies, as well as Senator Brown's retort of the *HS* misrepresentation. The second extensive article in *TA* described the Greens as polling well [54], with the potential of holding the balance of power in the Senate, and potentially putting the opposition in power via preferences. *TA* described this as the reason 'why a posse came after Brown this week' [54] in reference to controversy over the drug policy.

Like the *SMH*, *TA* coverage was more politically focused and less emotive than the *DT* or *HS*. However, it still failed to report the debate of harm minimisation strategies versus a zero tolerance approach. Perhaps more alarming than the similar reporting styles in the coverage of both elections is the similarity of the controversy itself. The *HS* claimed their 2004 report

was an 'exposé of the Greens' drug policy; however, identical issues had been raised the previous year by the *DT* in the neighbouring state.

Discussion

The summary document of the Greens' 'Drugs and Harm Minimisation' policy states support for 'programs leading to the controlled availability of other drugs, such as ecstasy and speed, under the supervision of medically qualified personnel' and 'controlled availability of heroin and safe injecting rooms' [10]. The coverage in all newspapers analysed in this study reflected the Greens' drug policy in that the issues contained in the articles were actually elements of the policy document. The articles obtained during the retrieval period showed a tendency by the *DT* and the *HS* towards using emotive and sensationalist language to position the issue of drug use within a moralistic context. The reporting by the *DT* and the *HS* focused primarily on presenting the policy in simplistic catch-phrases and relevant issues were often taken out of context. Although the reporting in the *SMH* and *TA* was less biased towards a specific moral stance, its coverage dealt primarily with the issue as an election component, and both papers excluded the implications of the policy from a social perspective.

These findings are generally consistent with previous research which reports that health policy (in that case related to health inequalities) was translated differently in different UK newspapers, depending on the audience and political perspectives, although there were common themes [20]. In terms of drug policy, however, the findings are quite unlike the findings of the Finnish study discussed earlier, which found that 'the papers did not pay any attention to the power struggles existing inside the government between the Ministry of the Interior, which advocated the tough drug policy, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, which advocated the treatment-oriented drug policy' [5].

While we are unable to comment on the impact such coverage may have had on the elections themselves, we do know that the media are capable of playing a powerful role in determining political outcomes—as was seen by the *DT*'s coverage of the Federal Government's approval for the 1997 ACT Prescription Heroin Maintenance Trial [55], which saw the decision reversed.

Interestingly, approximately 6 months after the 2004 federal election, the Australian Press Council upheld a complaint by Senator Bob Brown regarding the article 'Greens back illegal drugs' [56]. The Council called the article 'irresponsible journalism' and stated that 'in the context of an approaching election, the potential damage was considerable'. The Greens alleged further that 'the Liberal party use(d) the *Herald Sun* article to attack the Greens, but it generated much of the information . . . in the first place' [57]. Leaving aside the issue of whether these allegations are correct, they highlight the controversy surrounding the role of the media associated with this particular election.

There are a number of ways in which researchers can approach a media content analysis, ranging from quantitative analyses of column inch counts to an in-depth qualitative analysis of metaphors, as dictated by the research question [58]. The methodology used here is one standard approach for the analysis of a very specific issue and time-period (see for example [20,27]). However, a key limitation of papers of this kind is the possible bias in interpretation on the part of the authors themselves. In order to minimise this, the present paper was written by people with very divergent opinions on the issue—articles were analysed separately by all three authors, with the few differences resolved by discussion. The use of explicit framing categories may be useful in a larger study, although these empirical tools are usually very

content-specific and hence also open to possible subjectivity—a good discussion of issues related to the identification of such frames has been provided elsewhere [59].

The aim of the present paper was to provide a broad idea of the messages that were present in the media. Further analyses could break down the material by variables such as genre (for example, opinion pieces versus so-called ‘straight news’). Headlines and main text only were subject to analysis, but not other framing mechanisms such as pictures and captions, statistics and graphs. Given that sources are central to the media production process, further research could also examine differences in presentation between newspapers and a common source such as the Australian Associated Press news agency releases.

The unsettling conclusion of this content analysis is that of the 2 million potential readers who use the *SMH*, *TA*, *HS* and the *DT* for their primary news source, none were offered an accurate and objective appraisal of innovative and current drug policy issues in Australia.

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