

“You can't believe everything you see in the media”

How to critically analyse AOD-related stories in the news

Stephen J. Bright

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Introduction

The mainstream media (MSM) are critical to public debate on AOD issues. Yet they are often limited in the ways in which they are able to frame AOD use.

My research (Bright et al., 2006) found four key discursive frameworks used by MSM: Medical, moral, legal and political.

The vast majority of people who use drugs do not harm themselves or others, but these frameworks create a vacuum that pathologises drug use and perpetuates stigma, especially among those who are naive to the relative harms from AODs.

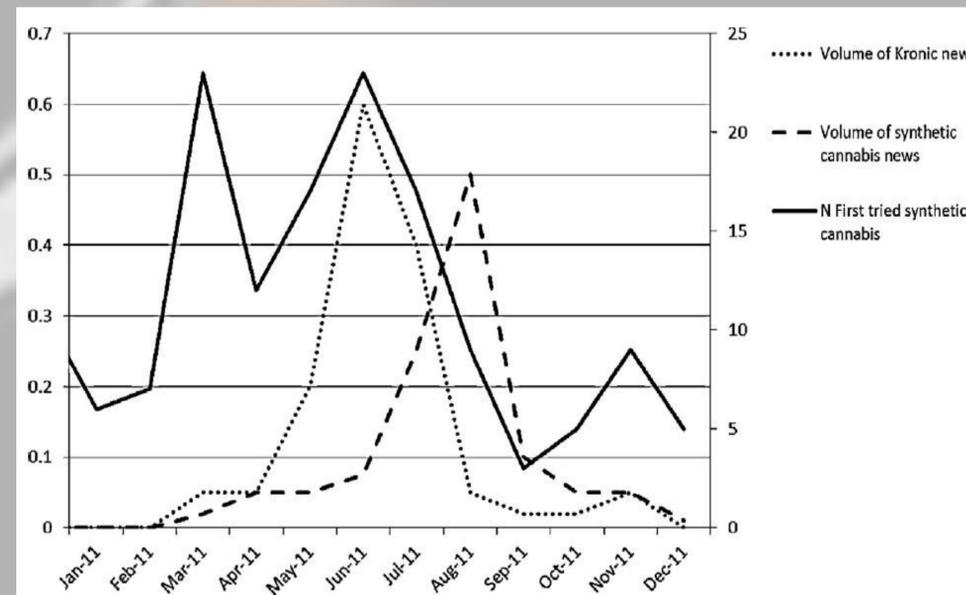
Stigma makes engagement in AOD and other treatment LESS likely (for review, see Van Boekel et al., 2013).

Further, the MSM often create “moral panics” about drugs that have tangible negative outcomes:

- counter-intuitively leading to increased AOD use (see figure 1 from Bright et al., 2013)
- Overestimates by the community of the prevalence of AOD use
- Reductions in the degree to which people believe the drug being reported on is harmful (Erceg-Hurn, 2008).

To address these issues with MSM reporting of AOD-related issues, a project called **AOD Media Watch** has been developed

aodmediawatch.com.au



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AOD Media Watch

AOD Media Watch aims to assist journalists to report more objectively using science and evidence rather than perpetuating myths, opinions and moral panic. It is not funded and governed by a reference group.

We have developed guidelines for journalists, people who are asked to comment on AOD-related issues and consumers.

In addition, we provide critical analysis of media reporting, both good and bad.



@AODMediaWatch



AODMediaWatch

Since launching at the 2017 VAADA conference, we have published 34 critical analyses and highlighted 11 examples of good reporting, and started a behind the headlines series, interviewing journalists that have been instrumental in assisting with positive policy change, such as Herald Sun reporter Ian Royall, who published a number of pieces regarding the Melbourne Supervised Injecting Centre.

Our reach has increased to 864 Facebook followers and 512 Twitter followers.

To continue to publish articles AOD Media Watch needs your submissions!

What can I do?

If you spot a piece of excellent or poor media reporting on AODs, submit your critical analysis via the website using the easy template.

Think about AOD reporting

When viewing AOD-related media, consider how the AOD issues are presented. Is alcohol constructed as a non-drug: as an economic commodity or even a medicine? Is the drug constructed as a pathogen, as criminogenic, having a certain inherent agency?



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Deconstructing AOD Media

Moore (2004) highlights the agency of certain drugs by the construction of certain personalities or “drugalities”, with heroin taking people hostage, methamphetamine perverse and alcohol as a larrikin.

Language, like the term “synthetics”, is used to conflate drugs and create moral panic. This term elicits the “appeal to nature” logical fallacy, in which people think synthetic is more harmful than natural.

People who use drugs are referred to as ‘junkies’, ‘addicts’ or ‘users’, perpetuating stigma.

More subtle marginalisation occurs through the use of terms like ‘dirty’ or ‘clean’ and ‘drug abuse’, suggesting any use is problematic.

References

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The screenshot shows a news article from AOD Media Watch. The main article is titled "Stigmatising coverage distorts perception of WA murder case" and is dated October 12, 2017. The article text discusses how recent court reporting on a WA man murdered over a \$15,000 debt has focused on the fact that those responsible (and the victim) all reported using methamphetamine, while there is no indication that methamphetamine intoxication was a significant factor in the killing (or the subsequent treatment of the victim's body). It notes that media coverage has featured headlines such as "Three meth users jailed over Perth man Jason Edge's death".

The sidebar contains a section for "MOST RECENT ARTICLES" with three items:

- Behind the headlines: The Herald Sun's Ian Royall on the campaign for Richmond's safe-injecting centre
- There are more positive ways to engage an effective community response to methamphetamine
- Search for an angle distorts discussion of drug issues (again)

Below this is a "SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER" form with fields for "First Name", "Last Name", and "Email address", and a "SUBSCRIBE" button.