

How the media do drugs: quality control and the reporting of drug issues in the UK print media

Ross Coomber *, Craig Morris, Laura Dunn

School of Social Sciences, University of Greenwich, Eltham, London SE9 2UG, UK

Received 18 January 2000; received in revised form 16 March 2000; accepted 18 April 2000

Abstract

Exaggeration, distortion, inaccuracy, sensationalism; each of these labels has been consistently applied to the reporting of drug related issues in the print and other media over the last 40 years and beyond. This research sought to understand what quality control mechanisms are employed by the UK print media in relation to issues related to illicit drugs to ensure accurate, informed and appropriate reporting. It was found that the print media in the UK employ almost no quality control mechanisms to ensure that such reporting takes place and that they predominately rely on the demonstrably insufficient qualities of the ‘good reporting’ skills that journalists bring to their research and writing. What concerns did exist regarding accuracy related predominately to protecting the publication from being sued for libel and no specific journalistic expertise of drug issues was considered necessary. A discussion of these issues is undertaken followed by the recommendation for the production of a negotiated media guide. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Media representation of drugs; Media images of drugs; Drugs and the media

If drugs could sue for misrepresentation, defamation and libel then they would (Gossop, 1996).

1. Introduction and background

The reporting of drug related issues in the media is often problematic in a number of

ways. What is reported may be more or less accurate, more or less exaggerated, and more or less sensationalised.

It is not the purpose of this research, however, to demonstrate when and how often the media presents drug issues in an unhelpful manner. Such research, undertaken through a range of reflexive and empirical methodologies, has already established that this is not a rare phenomenon (Orcutt and Turner, 1993; Bean, 1994; Coomber, 1997; Reinerman and

* Corresponding author.

Levine, 1997) nor has it ever been so (Inciardi, 1986; Kohn, 1992; Woodiwiss, 1998; Berridge, 1999). More specifically, it was the purpose of this research to explore why and how such reporting occurs so consistently and what mechanisms exist for quality control and accuracy regarding drug related reporting. In this sense, the concern of this research is more about trying to understand the process or processes through which the print media in the UK consistently produces representations of drug risks that are either wholly inaccurate, moderately so or exaggerated to a degree that is unhelpful and misleading.

That representations in the media regarding illicit drugs are often problematic has not only been recognised by drug field academics, drug field workers and many drug users. The report on *Prevention* published by the Government's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) in ACMD (1984) stated that 'Although their (the media's) precise effect is unclear, we are in no doubt that informed and balanced reporting can assist in the prevention of drug misuse. Equally, we are in no doubt that *sensational or inaccurate coverage can hinder effective prevention*' (emphasis added). More recently, the 1998 drug strategy (published by way of building on the 1995 White Paper) *Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain: The Government's Ten-Year Strategy for Tackling Drugs Misuse* re-stated that the media needs to provide 'responsible and informed coverage of drugs stories'. This time it was added that the Government will 'engage extensively with national, regional and local media to try to ensure a good level of informed debate, analysis and coverage'. Although the new United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator's unit has liaised with national and local media in an attempt to improve reporting, this has tended to be

quite limited in its approach. Often it has amounted to no more than utilising press releases or providing specific features that send an anti-drug message that is more akin to drug education. What has been missing to date is any attempt to ensure that 'responsible' reporting about drugs takes place in the broader less directed features and stories.

There are astounding examples of negligent or unethical media practices regarding illicit drugs. Some are explicit, others less so. The instance of the wholly fabricated front page story in the Washington Post of an 8-year-old heroin addict with 'needle marks freckling the baby smooth skin of his thin brown arms' whereby 'investigative' journalist Janet Cooke was initially feted and then awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing is, perhaps, the most extreme (Reinarman and Duskin, 1992). Dr Adam Weisman, an ex-journalist (now a professor in English at Hamilton College, New York) 'came out' about the approach of many journalists writing about drug issues in the US in the mid-1980s. Weisman admitted that he and other journalists resorted to 'cooking figures and using alarmist headlines and prose...to convince readers that practically everyone they know is addicted to crack, and that they too are likely to be addicted soon' (cited in Trebach, 1988). More recently Weisman has said that, 'Most (if not) virtually all journalism at a certain level (national newsmagazines, television, tabloids) is driven by publicity and economic concerns that push accuracy way down the list of values. There's nothing new in this: it's a case "fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me"' (Weisman, 1996; personal communication). For Reinarman and Duskin (1992) the example of the fabricated Janet Cooke story 'was only an egregious case of the

press's cultivated incapacity for understanding drug problems. If the Post scandal has value, it inheres in the accidental glimpse it affords into the normally hidden process by which media institutions force the untidy facts of social life through the sieve of dominant ideology'.

It would be overly simplistic to suggest that all that is reported about drugs in a sensationalised, inaccurate or misleading fashion is the fault of the media per se. As Kitzinger and Reilly (1997) have stated this is not a simple mechanistic or deterministic relationship and that 'the public profile of any risk issue is a product of the *interaction* between the media and their sources, as well as broader sociological factors'. This said, and in contrast to the broadcast media, there are 'no formal standards which require the press to maintain a commitment to accuracy and the avoiding of bias in disseminating information and opinion' (Gibbins, 1991).

The intention of this research was to highlight some of the mechanisms, or indeed, the absence of mechanisms that the publishing media employ to mitigate against irresponsible and unhelpful publishing, against inaccurate reporting and, in short, examine the effectiveness of quality control measures around the reporting of drug related stories.

2. Methods

A narrow mix of methods were employed to carry out this research. Predominately, key members of the publishing media were interviewed over the phone using a questionnaire to aid what was in effect a semi-structured interview, although a minority filled in the questionnaire (adapted for this purpose) and returned it by fax or post.

2.1. The sample

An attempt was made to include all of the primary 'household name' publications covering a range of categories. Those categories included, national newspapers (of which obtained were seven tabloids, three 'quality' broadsheet); four local newspapers from South East London; seven men's (or 'lads') magazines; seven women's magazines; five teenage girl magazines; four music/dance magazines and two other publications, one a famous London listings magazine and the other a heavily sold 'charitable' magazine which covers contemporary issues and pays attention to the music scene amongst others. Respondents were editors; feature editors, crime correspondents or those with some responsibility for having 'managed' drug related stories in the past. The bulk of the research was carried out between January and September 1997.

Those publications that would be considered the genre leaders and the publications with established reputations, were represented in each of the areas. As such, those represented would account for the majority of sales in their respective areas. New publications (less than 1-year-old) were not included as it was considered that these publications would not have quite the history of publishing on drug related issues that more established rivals would. In the area of teenage girl magazines, for example, there are numerous new publications which have recently emerged on the newsagents shelf, few of which have had the opportunity to develop a policy on, or even run a story on drug related issues.

Anonymity was assured for both interviewee and publication.

As the research developed, it became clear that the print media often claimed to utilise a number of key information providing agen-

cies when preparing a report or story. Given this, five of the main agencies cited were also contacted for their views on the way that the media used them.

3. Findings

Although there is significant difference between the types of publication involved in this research, the findings overall were remarkably similar.

3.1. The print media's awareness and use of regulations or codes of practice regarding the reporting of illicit drugs

Although the Press Complaints Commission does not provide any specific guidance on how drug related issues should be dealt with, its Code of Practice clearly states in relation to any reporting that 'Newspapers and periodicals should take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted material' (PCC, 1996). This is a clear lead about quality control that applies equally to drug related issues as it does to any other. There was some confusion, however, about the nature of the PCC guidelines, what they referred to and indeed what relevance they might have in general.

Only seven out of the 38 publications reported that they were aware of any regulations or codes of practice that might apply to the reporting of illicit drugs. Those reporting awareness, usually of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) guidelines, included three 'tabloid' newspapers, one popular music magazine, one women's magazine, one 'listings' magazine, and a local newspaper that stated the codes were 'not used'. There was no pattern to those that were aware and it did not relate to the so-called 'quality' newspapers.

Although few of the publications were aware of non-specific guidelines such as those laid down by the PCC, it also became clear that there were few concerns about how drug stories should be reported in general, *other than in terms of the risk presented to the publication itself*. Only 11 of the 38 publications reported using any regulations (including internal ones imposed by the editorial stance of the publication) to aid the structuring of a story. Of the 11, that referred to having guidelines or regulations to help structure the story five related that this meant getting the story 'checked with lawyers' to avoid prosecution in any way. Concern was with the legality of the story, not with quality control. It became clear, however, that quality control was assumed, in many senses to look after itself through good journalistic practice. Good journalistic practice, it was advocated, produced 'the facts' in a story. One local paper, for example, suggested that they got their facts from the police and did not otherwise report on issues relating to drugs. As will be discussed later, it is often the problematic and selective *use* of so-called facts from so-called authoritative sources that is as much at issue as existence or absence of mechanisms of quality control.

Good journalistic practice was cited throughout the research as sufficient a mechanism to ensure that the quality of reporting around drugs was as accurate and reliable as possible.

3.2. Existence of procedures for verifying the accuracy of the content before publishing a story or report on drug related issues

It is clear that much of the print media does not perceive drug related stories to be particularly complex or requiring any particular levels of expertise or special consideration. This is reflected in the relative absence

of procedures that surrounds the verification of accuracy on drug related issues. Only two of the 10 national papers (both ‘tabloids’), stated that any procedures were in place to verify the accuracy of reporting on drug issues. Only one of these stated that they would seek help either through experts in hospitals, the police, the Institute for the Study of Drug Dependence (ISDD) or the paper’s own doctor. But even in this case it was stressed that this would occur only if the reporter had any doubts about the content. The other paper’s ‘procedure’ related merely to the fact that every story was checked by lawyers.

The responses by the magazines were just as emphatic. Only two of the 25 magazines (both being ‘music/dance’ magazines) and two of the four local newspapers reported having any procedures for verifying accuracy beyond simply checking with their lawyers. In each of these cases the publication claimed that it always refers to an expert or specialist agency such as ISDD, the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse (SCODA) or the National Drugs Helpline. The majority of publications, therefore, perceived that accuracy was achieved sufficiently and appropriately through good journalistic practice.

3.3. What checks are made to verify factual material?

Nearly all of the publications claimed that they did make use of ‘experts’ or specialist drug agencies or information providing services. Only two newspapers (one a national tabloid, the other a local free newspaper) stated that they did not make use of others’ expertise to verify factual content about drugs and related issues. Common citations related to the National Drugs Helpline telephone service, to ISDD,

and to Release in which doctors, hospitals and chemists were also mentioned. Responses to this line of questioning, however, were often accompanied with the ‘*we may use (stated agency or expert)*’, ‘*when necessary*’, ‘*sometimes*’, ‘*as seemed appropriate*’ or ‘*if required*’ type responses that tended to signify that this was neither routine nor likely. One men’s magazine even referred to one self-confessed (and previously convicted) cannabis smuggler and legalisation advocate, as a source of ‘expertise’.

3.4. Specific journalistic expertise into drug issues

Only one of broadsheet papers, four of the ‘lads’ magazines, one women’s magazine and one ‘charity’ magazine claimed any expertise for their writers on drug issues. This expertise was various and included the following claims,

‘some [experience] — experience of writing on it’;

‘a range [of expertise] — from casual use to scientific research’;

‘Health editor is [an expert]’;

‘some [journalists] are clued up re: drugs’;

‘personal experience and in-depth reading’;

‘we have a doctor who writes on drugs who we accredit as an expert’;

‘[they have] experienced writers in the area’.

These comments suggest little to reassure that appropriate expertise is employed and are, respectively, woolly to say the least. Perhaps the most problematic response in regards to this avenue of enquiry was the idea that because someone had used drugs, this somehow made them an expert. It may give them more credibility on the magazine they are working for, but it certainly does not provide them with the credentials for being

an expert on drugs. The rest of the publications merely responded that their journalists had no expertise; that it was ‘not necessary’, or indicated that good journalistic practice would suffice. Kitzinger and Reilly (1997) report that in relation to complex scientific areas such as new human genetics, it is clear that even the science correspondents often have an insufficient background in molecular biology ‘and several admitted that they found it difficult to understand genetics themselves’, and that ‘most press reports emphasise straightforward ‘findings’ without any consideration of the broader social implications of such research’. It is evident that good journalistic practice is not sufficient in a range of areas to produce reliable, contextualised reporting. Drug related issues surely fall into this category.

3.5. *Style of reporting*

Although each of the publications made it clear that what goes into a story, the accuracy of the reporting, and the extent to which it is properly researched is reliant upon good journalistic practice, a unanimous response from each publication declared that the *style* of reporting employed was decided by the editor or appropriate sub-editor. The style of a story or feature may, however, be problematic in a number of ways. For example, a human-interest story, where the mother of a dead drug user is permitted to declare drug use as likely to end in death, is understandable but unhelpfully emotive. Without a corrective or contextualising statement regarding mortality and drug use more generally, the statement stands but as (uninformed) comment not ‘fact’. As will be discussed later, ‘style’ of reporting may be of greater concern than minor inaccuracies regarding the scientific literature.

3.6. *What the agencies that journalists use for research/validation of information say about the way that they are used*

The five major drug information services/agencies mentioned by those interviewed were contacted and the key individuals in those agencies were asked to discuss the way the media interacted with them. The agencies concerned were the Institute for the Study of Drug Dependency, Release, the National Drugs Helpline, the Health Education Authority (HEA) and the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse.

Each of the agencies, apart from the National Drugs Helpline, employs a Press Officer or Advisor whose responsibility it is to field calls and queries from journalists or researchers working for the various media. Although the National Drugs Helpline will provide information on health risks or drug effects from any individual if a journalist declares themselves to be a journalist, he/she will be referred on to the Health Education Authority’s Press Advisor and/or ‘Drugs Team’. The HEA Press Advisor related that journalists contacting them were usually looking for either a government comment regarding a particular issue or an HEA comment. More specific information was usually referred to one of the more specialist agencies such as ISDD, SCODA or Release.

All of the key individuals spoken to related a fairly consistent position about how journalists used them, how they interacted with them and, importantly, about how they perceived the output from the print media after having been used or interviewed by them.

A common theme to emerge was that journalists were split into two groups, those that were relatively informed and those that were less so. The former group tended to be individuals who may have written on drug issues previously or who were writing a feature (e.g.

for a Sunday newspaper) and not up against too tight a deadline. The latter group was described as those who were less likely to have any background in drug issues and that were responding to tight deadlines. Journalists of this kind were suggested to be more likely to be writing a story of a 'responsive' nature. This might take the form of a response to an event that had occurred or come to notice in the previous few days, such as a government press release or the death of a young or prominent person that had gained media coverage.

Despite the perceived distinction between the relatively informed and uninformed journalist/researcher however, the various agencies did not perceive the press or the media in general to abuse what information they were given or to find themselves misquoted or misrepresented (a common claim of politicians and other spokespersons). Indeed the agencies often perceived talking to the press as an opportunity to raise the profile of their particular agency by having it cited as a source.

Three of the agencies were very clear that mediating with the press was a relatively skilled job. It was felt that it was: (i) necessary to have a specified 'link' person and (ii) that this person was able to 'dampen down the enthusiasm' that often accompanied queries and to guide them away from the obvious exaggeration or distortion that 'the pushy ones' may be leaning towards.

Unlike the occasional television programme script that one or two of the agencies would be given for perusal, it was almost never the case that printed material would be provided for assessment of accuracy or style.

Thus, there is no transparent or obvious aspect of the way that these agencies are used as information providers that point to how so much reporting is of a relatively inadequate standard. The factors that produce such an

outcome clearly lay elsewhere, as shall be discussed below.

4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the ways in which the print media work at producing accurate and reliable information about drug related issues. More specifically, it sought to explore the quality control mechanisms that the print media employs during the production of writing on drug issues. Given that it is widely accepted that much reporting on drug related issues is not of a high quality, the further aim of the research was to assess what the weaknesses of the current mechanisms are and where they lay. The findings are really quite conclusive and do not take a great deal of digesting. By and large, the print media do not have any quality control mechanisms that apply to the reporting of specialist areas such as illicit drugs and their use. The controls that do exist are primarily concerned with the legality of the reports and the protection of the publications from prosecution for libel. Only a fifth (19%) of the publications (and none of the so-called 'quality' newspapers) were even aware of the minimalist guidelines set by the Press Complaints Commission that would apply to reporting on drug related issues. The overriding perspective that emerged from the research was that the publications felt that 'good journalistic practice' was the key to quality control, and, thus, to accurate and appropriate reporting. Good journalistic practice entailed 'checking the facts' and referring to appropriate authorities and sources of information.

It is clear that journalists do use a number of information providing agencies to help them with the production of a story or feature but what is not clear is whether journal-

ists use these information sources appropriately.

It is doubtful whether the print media questions the validity of concepts such as instant addiction, dangerous adulteration, or the dealer at the school gates when undertaking their research. These are probably seen as 'givens' in a world about which certain 'facts' are relatively uncontested and, therefore, do not need checking (Coomber, 1999). Davies and Coggans (1991) suggest that this is because the writers 'know' the required script and because the media is just as misinformed about illicit drugs and drug users as most people we should not be surprised to find their writing to be misinformed. As such, anecdotes, which can be readily found to support each of these concepts, are likely to be the 'facts' that are reported.

Specific journalistic expertise was not deemed to be necessary, although much research on how the media reports on drug related issues suggest otherwise. One journalist, in fact, stated quite categorically, that as long as the journalists were doing their job properly, no specialist knowledge was needed. This was certainly not the case as regards the reporting of other 'scientific/technical' areas such as HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and early 1990s (HEA, 1993, 1994) and more recently, that of BSE. Even where 'expertise' did exist it was often insufficient or quite simply inadequate. The idea that a journalist with personal experience of drug use or the drug scene, or those that had written on drugs previously have expertise is, we would suggest, unreasonably naïve. In fact, the whole issue of what constitutes an 'authority' on drugs was found to be problematic. The police, drug field workers, doctors and nurses are commonly consulted, as are those who have been drug users themselves and those who have been affected by drug use in some

way. Nonetheless, doctors may have little or no knowledge of illicit drugs and their use beyond the most basic and may, as with the police and even many drug field workers believe in and propagate many of the common but unsubstantiated beliefs that the scientific literature has long discredited. It is not necessarily appropriate to quote a poisons expert as being an expert on drug control policy merely because they work in the field of drug toxicity. Likewise, drug workers, often relying on clients' anecdotes do not necessarily provide reliable information about the drugs market (Coomber, 1997). It is also insufficient to uncritically quote the assertions and assumptions of how the drug world is constituted by a parent of a dead teenager who is angry, needing a scapegoat and often ill informed. The evangelist ex-addict is, likewise, good copy but not necessarily capable of relating the reality of drug addiction and use beyond their personal experience. There are, thus, significant weaknesses in the style of reporting that can lead to an over-reliance on material that, although it comes from an 'authority', is unlikely to be reliable, accurate or ultimately helpful. As regards the reporting of unsubstantiated rumour, such as the reporting of dangerous cutting practices or a 'drugs epidemic' on a local housing estate one journalist justified it by suggesting that 'if it [the rumour] is in the public interest — it will be published'. Unfortunately, the drugs world is full of unsubstantiated rumour that would appear to be in the public interest. The reporting of unsubstantiated 'facts' re-enforces existing prejudices and fears and notions of what the drug world and those involved in it look like. Responsible reporting must be appropriately informed reporting not based on rumour, anecdote or emotive response as these have been repeatedly shown to be unreliable (Coomber, 1999).

5. Recommendations

Since, at present, there are little or no quality control mechanisms to either ensure or promote responsible and accurate reporting of drug related issues in the print media, the recommendations that follow from this research are relatively straightforward. A set of guidelines for reporting on drug related issues should be produced that would help avoid overly sensationalised, inaccurate or misleading reporting. This media guide should, while providing appropriate scientific information regarding illicit drugs, also provide guidance on responsible reporting itself. Obviously, 'responsible' reporting may be defined in a range of ways. The suggestion put forward here is that responsible reporting should avoid sensationalism as this is often a force for exaggeration at the very least and, as number of drug education evaluations have shown, may even increase drug use. Further, responsible reporting should also not perpetuate standard myths about drug effects, addiction and the likelihood of mortality or risk. The guide should be produced in collaboration with the major information providers that are already interacting with journalists as well as the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and piloted on amenable publications and journalists. The guide would need to be regularly up-dated and evaluated. Handled sensitively, the guide would hopefully come to be seen a useful tool to aid reporting as opposed to a tool of oppression aiming to censor. The press clearly believes that what it is already doing is responsible, the job of the guide would be to convince them and guide them towards more effective means to achieve this admirable aim.

References

- ACMD (Advisory Committee on the Mis-Use of Drugs), Prevention, London: HMSO, 1984.
- Bean P. Cocaine and crack: the promotion of an epidemic. In: Bean P, editor. *Cocaine and Crack: Supply and Use*. London: Macmillan, 1994.
- Berridge V. *Opium and the People: Opiate Use and Drug Control Policy in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century*. England, London: Free Association Books, 1999.
- Coomber R. The adulteration of illicit drugs with dangerous substances: the discovery of a myth. *Contemporary Drug Problems* 1997;24(2):239–71.
- Coomber R. Lay perceptions and beliefs about the adulteration of illicit drugs in the 1990s — a student sample. *Addiction Research* 1999;7(4):323–38.
- Davies J, Coggans N. *The Facts About Adolescent Drug Abuse*. London: Cassell Education Ltd, 1991.
- Gibbins T. *Regulating the Media*. London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1991.
- Gossop M. *Living with Drugs*. Aldershot: Arena, 1996.
- HEA (Health Education Authority), *HIV and AIDS: A Guide for Journalists*. London: HEA, 1993.
- HEA (Health Education Authority), *HIV/AIDS Mass Media Activities*. London: HEA, 1994.
- Inciardi JA. *The War on Drugs: Heroin, Cocaine, Crime and Public Policy*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1986.
- Kitzinger J, Reilly J. Media and expert constructions of risk, Risk and Human Behaviour (1997);1:11–3.
- Kohn M. *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Underground*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992.
- Orcutt JD, Turner JB. Shocking numbers and graphic accounts: quantified images of drug problems in the print media. *Social Problems* 1993;40(2):190–206.
- PCC (Press Complaints Commission). *Code of Practice and Report No. 35*. London: PPC, 1996.
- Reinarman C, Duskin C. Dominant ideology and drugs in the media. *International Journal on Drugs Policy* 1992;3(1):6–15.
- Reinarman C, Levine HG, editors. *Crack in America Demon Drugs and Social Justice*. London: University of California Press, 1997.
- Trebach AS. *The Great Drug War: and Radical Proposals which could make America safe again*. New York: Macmillan, 1988.
- White Paper (1998). *Tackling drugs to build a better Britain: the government's 10-year strategy for tackling drugs misuse*, The Stationary Office <http://www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm39/3945/3945.htm>.
- Woodiwiss M. Reform, racism and rackets: alcohol and drug prohibition in the United States. In: Coomber R, editor. *The Control of Drugs and Drug Users: Reason or Reaction*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998.