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Mind-Altering Discourse: Experts and Sources in the News on the UK Drug Policy Reform Debate

On 30th October 2014, a Home Office report concluded that tough drug enforcement does not decrease the use of illegal drugs, casting doubt (according to some) on 40 years of UK drugs policy. This study presents a quantitative content analysis of media coverage following the publication of the report. It finds the political elites dominate the coverage, and the debate is impoverished by a lack of 'expert' source diversity and breadth of focus. Furthermore, despite the apparently pro-reform tone of the media coverage, against the prevailing status quo, where overarching narratives on drugs are rarely challenged, this study concludes it is in the narrow scope of the debate, rather than the absence of 'experts' and the predominance of the political elite, where evidence of hegemony and underlying dominant ideology can be located.

Keywords: Drug policy, news, sources, political elites, experts



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INTRODUCTION

On 30th October 2014, a Home Office report concluded that tough drug enforcement does not decrease the use of illegal drugs, casting doubt (according to some) on 40 years of UK drugs policy. On the same day MPs took part in a debate on a motion proposing that an evidence-based approach would lead to a more effective drug policy (House of Commons 2014). The motion was agreed to without a division. As the current drug policy reform debate is explicitly about the need (or not) for evidence-based policy, this study investigates the role played by experts and sources – those who supply the 'evidence' - in the coverage in the UK news media. It presents a quantitative content analysis of recent media coverage of debates over UK drug policy to answer the following research question: against a backdrop of calls for evidence-based policy making, how are experts and sources used in the news on the UK drug policy reform debate?

Literature Review

In the UK, all public services are expected to produce evidence-based policies (Bennett and Holloway 2010). 'Evidence-based policy' proposes that scientists and other experts should inform policy-makers, with the expectation that policy will reflect accurate knowledge rather than political biases (Tieberghien 2014). Drug policy is an area of social policy in which calls for evidence-based policy have been particularly strong (Valentine 2009). As Lancaster (2014, p.948) points out, the evidence-based drug policy endeavour is based on the assumption "that the increased uptake of 'evidence' within policy decision-making processes will improve outcomes and increase the legitimacy of decisions made".

Drugs were constructed as a social problem at the end of the 1960s and have become defined in public debate as 'other', seen as things which are "uncivilized, distasteful, arouse fear, are unknown and uncontrollable" (MacGregor 2014, p.226). At the same time, drugs policy is also made in a "politically charged atmosphere", one often not seen to be favourable to the ideals of evidence-based policy making (Monaghan 2014, p.1025). The efficacy of the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA) 1971 has been one of the most widely debated areas of UK drugs policy in the national media and one where the "clash between science and politics is highly visible" (Monaghan 2014, p.1025). However, MacGregor (2014, p.232) argues that the nature of the debate about drugs is, at its core, a debate about a sense of right and wrong that is unlikely to be successfully addressed as a matter of scientific discourse.

News discourse is integral to framing public policy issues and shaping public debate (Gamson 1988) and this is true of drugs as much as any other issue (Hughes et al. 2011). In a study of media coverage of the Belgian drugs policy debate, Tieberghien (2014) found that media discourse strongly influenced both the public's and policymakers' understanding, as well as the content of the debate itself. Media reporting of these debates tends to focus not on the complex scientific deliberation and the evidence base, "but on the political sensibilities of politicians [...] and the extent to which they are willing to be guided by evidence" (Monaghan 2014, p.1025). An overarching narrative that "drugs are dangerous" plays a dominant role in which the mass media have been shown to be important in public and political discourse (MacGregor 2014, p.22).

Scholarship on the news media and drugs tends to focus on representations of drug use (Taylor 2008), portrayals of illicit drug issues (Hughes et al. 2011), and argues that the media construct narratives about drugs that are simplistic and sensationalist (Coomber et al. 2000). The role of experts in the mediated drug policy debate is an under-researched area, despite a growing body of literature dedicated to better realising the goal of evidence-based drug policy (see for example Strang et al. 2012). Expert quotes serve a number of purposes in a story, for example, setting context, legitimizing research or policies, providing balance, and articulating implications (Conrad 1999, p.299). Yet, research by Coomber et al. (2000, p.224) found an over-reliance on 'expert sources' that are unlikely to be reliable or accurate. For example, the validity of certain concepts, such as 'instant addiction' or 'dangerous adulteration', is probably accepted by the media as 'givens' (ibid.). Davies and Coggans (1991) argue that this is because journalists 'know' the required script and are just as uninformed about illicit drugs and drug users as most people.

Furthermore, in the case of the Belgian drug policy debates, Tieberghien (2014) found the presentation of scientific knowledge was inaccurate or distorted, and that the media may also support the selective utilization of scientific knowledge.

The analysis of sources is important from a "sociologically articulated theory of media representations and media roles" (Hansen et al. 1998, p.108). An examination of "who is portrayed as saying and doing what to whom and with what key attributes is essential in order to understand media roles in social representation and power relationships in society" (Hansen et al. 1998, p.108). It is the routine *structures* of news production that mean the media come to "reproduce the definitions of the powerful" (Hall et al. 1979 in Tumber 1999, p.255). The practical pressures of news production coupled with professional demands of impartiality and objectivity "combine to produce a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions" (ibid, p.254). It is in this way sources in a position of power become what Hall et al (ibid) call *primary definers*.

The media are analysed "in terms of a theory of ideological power underpinned by a Gramscian conception of the struggle for *hegemony* between dominant and subordinate classes in capitalist societies" (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994 in Tumber 1999, p.257). As Gitlin (1980, p.277) points out, the media "have a general interest in stabilizing the liberal capitalist order as a whole, and it is this interest, played out through all the hegemonic routines, which stands behind the dominant news frames".

So we can expect the media to have a powerful role in the UK drug policy debate; the literature highlights the power of the media to influence both public and policymakers, as well as the content of the debate. In a debate about evidence-based policy, expert sources would seem to be important. However, previous work suggests that drugs continue to be constructed as 'dangerous', and that reporting is more likely to focus on the political sensibilities of politicians than the science and evidence in question.

METHODOLOGY

The drugs policy reform debate in the UK reignited on 30th October 2014 with the publication of a Home Office report that concluded tough drug enforcement does not decrease the use of illegal drugs. The debate is explicitly about the need (or not) for evidence-based policy, and this study investigates the role played by experts and sources— those who supply the 'evidence' - in the coverage in the UK news media. I use content analysis to explore the diversity of sources and expertise relating to a specific event, the recent media debate surrounding reform of UK drug laws and then draw conclusions by reflecting on the literature review. Content analysis allows systematic analysis of communications content in order to understand "relative prominences and absences of key characteristics in media texts" (Hansen et al. 1998, p.95). Seven UK national newspapers were selected, representing broadsheet, mid-market and tabloids. The time period chosen for analysis was October 2014 -December 2014 to encompass the release of the Home Office report and the parliamentary debate that followed. Relevant articles were identified using LexisNexis using variations on the search terms 'drug laws' and 'drug policy'. The search identified 61 articles (news, editorial and opinion), and after deleting those that did not refer substantively or at all to the issue under scrutiny, 41 met the inclusion criteria and were eligible for coding and analysis.

The unit of analysis is the sources and experts who have been **directly** quoted in a story, and how journalists used these quotes (after Conrad 1999). A maximum of three sources, their order in the text, the uses to which the sources were put were coded in each article, as well as the source's position 'pro-reform' or 'anti-reform'. The number of sources per article ranged from 1 to 12, with an average of 2 sources quoted per article. In total 84 direct quotes from sources were coded. Articles were thus measured for this relatively objective content as well as the more latent and interpretive content in an analysis of the dominant news frame. News frames determine what is relevant (Hertog and McLeod 2001, p.144) and the range of potential frames were determined through a reading of texts (for example Inciardi 1999; Bennett and Holloway 2010; Monaghan 2011, 2013). Six potential frames were identified following a pilot reading, and each article was analysed for the dominant frame, as well as for tone towards liberalization (as was proposed) of drugs policy (positive, neutral or negative). A coding schedule was developed to classify content and articles were coded and entered into SPSS for basic statistical tests.

ANALYSIS OF KEY FINDINGS

As a group, members of the political elite dominated coverage (57 of 84 direct quotes), however, the researcher also coded separately for the key political actors who were quoted disproportionately frequently: Norman Baker (16), the Liberal Democrat Home Office minister responsible for crime prevention and responsible for tackling drugs issues; the Home Office (9); and the prime minister (11). Other political actors (21), for example backbench Members of Parliament, have been grouped together ('politicians'). The press themselves are directly quoted (8), either through editorial comment, or in one paper's reporting of another's stated position. Journalists also used direct quotes from representatives of advocacy groups, for example, drugs reform charity Transform (8).

Conspicuous by their near absence are scientists, medical practitioners, academics or institutions (4) whose 'evidence' is being publically called for by both the reformers and those advocating the efficacy of the status quo. Likewise, members of the public, and drug users and their families are barely referred to (2). Hall et al.'s (1978) notion of primary definers is somewhat problematic in that it is a broad characterisation (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994 in Tumber 1999, p.258). This study revealed that the primary definers in the news coverage are actually members of the same government locked in a dispute over a question of policy. Baker is the most frequently quoted source; he is publically pro-reform and openly critical of parliamentary colleagues and his own department. Baker's predominance in the coverage could suggest a challenge to the status quo, both to government policy and the dominant construction of 'drugs as dangerous'.

Quantifying the types of actors who are quoted in media coverage may go "a long way toward showing how social power is expressed" in the mass media (Hansen et al. 1998, p.109), however, this study also analyses the uses to which these 'voices' are being put, as did Hansen et al.'s study. Baker is most frequently used at the first source in the story, and both he and other politicians are predominantly used to provide the *context* in which to view findings/policies. For example, Baker highlights the political context in which a 'seminal' report on reform of UK drug policies has been published:

"For too long, successive governments have been unwilling to look at the evidence" (The Independent 30 October 2014).

Journalists also use quotes from particular sources to highlight the *implications*, meanings and consequences of findings/policies. For example, speaking about decriminalisation and health-focused reform, Caroline Lucas MP suggests that implications of a change in the law would be:

"...you don't have people shooting up in toilets, parks and public stairwells and it's much safer...it means you can reach out to people who are perhaps not in treatment" (The Independent 30 October 2014).

Quotes from advocacy organisations are used to provide *legitimacy* to findings that suggest the need for reform. For example, Danny Kushlick, founder of Transform: "...the Home Office has admitted that enforcing tough drug laws doesn't necessarily reduce levels of drug use" (The Daily Telegraph 30 October 2014). Quotes from the Home Office and the prime minister (both anti-reform) are used by journalists to provide *balance*, for example, the prime minister:

"I don't think anyone can read that report and say it definitely justifies this approach or that approach..." (The Guardian 31 October 2014).

The recent drugs debate turns on the role of 'evidence' in policy making. Yet, it is clear from this analysis, that not only are experts from the fields of science and medicine conspicuous by their absence, but journalists have used source quotes in a very specific way. Quotes are used to highlight the political context into which evidence and policies are discussed, or to note their societal implications (rising/falling drug use, drug related crime, simplistic depictions of drug use), and are not used to explicate research findings or policies. As MacGregor (2013, p.p.227) points out, "evidence has to compete with values in the political game", since politicians are representatives of wider publics, values and sentiments are crucial if politicians are to carry the public with them.

Indeed, over half (23) of the articles in the sample were framed as 'party politics' where imminent general election, coalition conflict and *ad hominem* attacks were observed themes. Other debate frames identified were as follows: 'legislation and regulation' (5), 'decriminalisation' (5), 'public health' (4), 'law and order' (2) and 'criminal justice and crime' (1).

Despite the presence of alternative frames, substantively the findings provide evidence that the debate is narrow in breadth and scope; it is also narrow in depth as sources are a subset of political elite. Quotes from medical professionals were only counted in two articles. These findings are consistent with Monaghan's (2014) descriptions of media reporting of the debates since the inception of the MDA 1971 where the focus has typically been on the political sensibilities of the politicians involved. In contemporary Britain, MacGregor (2014, p.228) notes, "there is one overarching narrative which it would be heretical to challenge: that is that 'drugs are dangerous'. In this study the media coverage highlights the context and implications of research and policies, but effectively sidelines the 'challenge' of evidence against the status quo. Seeming to contradict this, the majority of articles (26) were positive in tone. *The Guardian* headline on 30th October, for example, was "*The Sun and the Guardian* agree on need for a change in drugs policy: Oh yes they do – and *the Independent* agrees too." Furthermore, the voices of the pro-reformers are heard loud and clear.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the persistent calls for drugs policy to be 'evidence based', 'expert' opinion was absent from the media coverage, a phenomenon observed by others over four decades of debate (Monaghan 2014). The observed predominance of the voices of the political elite, the 'party politics' framing and journalists' use of sources is consistent with the struggle between evidence, politics and values in the drugs policy debate described by MacGregor (2013).

Baker's disproportionate access to the media, and the media's positive tone towards reform can still be accommodated within the hegemonic routines of news coverage which, as Gitlin (1980, p.274) points out, "are vulnerable to the demands of oppositional and deviant groups". As considered in the analysis, one reading of Baker's predominance in the media coverage as a source could be that he is successfully challenging the status quo. Yet, while such 'deviant' views are imported into and reproduced within the news media, they do so "in terms derived from the dominant ideology" (Gitlin 1980, p.274), in a narrow debate between the political elite framed in terms of party politics and conflict.

Furthermore, understanding 'who benefits' from current drugs policies reveals an underlying ideology that supports dominant sets of interests, notes MacGregor (2014, p.232); arguing that a prerequisite of fundamental change in drugs policy is linking drugs as an issue into "broader questions of health, inequality, poverty, race, class, vested interests and profit". In other words, the dominant ideology is maintained by keeping the drugs debate in closed policy circles that do not challenge the broader questions such as vested interests. While a lack of diversity of sources (including the public, addicts and their families) impoverishes the democratic debate, the calls for evidence-based debate serve to perpetuate the dominant ideology as they effectively sideline the broader questions and thus serve to entrench the status quo.

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