

Changes in Media Framing of Drugs throughout History

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### **Introduction**

The media is ever changing in our society, and reports can often contradict each other and becomes more and more noticeable as time passes. What is hailed as a miracle cure today may be shown to cause cancer next year. A new fad diet promoted by the news could end up causing malnutrition. As facts and information change, so do stories. It's not all based on the change of information either, journalists have the power to shape a story to be seen in a negative or positive light, and this framing is so powerful that a story could spark a nationwide movement. This rise and fall of effect has been especially noticeable when you take a look at how the media has reported on drugs throughout America's history, many drugs got their start in the early 1800's and were glorified by the world for their beneficial effects, and the success and legality of these drugs was dependent on how the media reported them.

Even present day, mass media is fluctuating with conflicting stories. A newspaper in Denver, CO is praising the new marijuana laws while more conservative outlets are preaching its ill effects. There are federal warnings required to be visible on packaging and advertisements for tobacco and alcohol right below marketing mass marketing promoting them. With technology at a point where there are more mediums for mass communication than ever, everyone can have a say, voicing their opinions to thousands or even millions of people with the click of a button. The media and public are intertwined, when the public majority undergoes a shift in attitude change about something, the media follows and likewise, when the media shifts, so does the public. The major news outlets, being a generally trusted source of information, can have a profound impact on the public's perception of an idea, and how a story is framed can cause the same change in perceptions.

### **Literature Review**

The light in which drugs are presented by the media shifts and changes, some drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, has shifted towards a unwavering negative outlook that's not likely to change (although there has been success in Portugal's legalization of all drugs to combat overdoses (Paton, 2009)), when in contrast, marijuana has become the center of much debate revolving around its medicinal use and legalization after almost one hundred years of being outlawed.

Tobacco, one of the most widely used drugs, second only to alcohol, has experienced roller coaster like media support since the 1800's (Meier, 2007). In the mid 1800's, before federal regulations existed and the public education was low, tobacco companies had a field day marketing its product and getting consumers hooked on it. Media reports glamourized it and smoking cigarettes was the cool thing to do. As consumers started to rethink the health implications of cigarettes, tobacco companies responded by rolling out advertisements and news stories focused on doctors endorsing cigarettes and preaching health benefits such as, getting leaner, digestion, and dry throat to name a few (Vaknin, 2007).

The marketing effects of mass advertisement towards children was also pronounced. Advertisements depicted Santa Clause smoking Pall Malls and even babies and cartoons like the Flintstones were used to promote the product. As the years passed and consumers became more educated through media reports citing the negative effects of smoking, laws and regulations were passed one by one limiting what tobacco companies could get away with. The media slowly changed how it framed cigarettes to the public over the past 200 years and present day what little

advertising is still allowed by tobacco companies is very limited and finding a news report that advocates the use of tobacco is next to impossible to find (Vaknin, 2007).

Alcohol is the most widely used drug in history and the Medias ever changing attitudes towards it have had huge effects on its history, even going so far as to be the root cause for it to become illegal for a short time in the United States. Alcohol can be traced to the first civilization on earth, and has been used by people ever since (Patton, 2009). Alcohols depiction by the media shared similarities with tobacco, and cartoons and young kids in ads was not uncommon. Richard Hobson, a United States Navy Rear Admiral, nicknamed “The Father of American Prohibition” was so successful in his use of mass media to depict the negative effects of alcohol and alcoholism that federal law was passed in 1920 banning its sale and consumption (Patton, 2009).

Since the end of prohibition in 1933, the Media no longer exclusively focuses on the negatives of alcohol, but splits its portrayal based on current events and network. Present day, it’s not uncommon to find a news report about the benefits of red wine for your body, or a study indicating that the agave in tequila is effective at burning fat. In fact, on the TODAY show Kathie Lee and Hoda frequently consume alcoholic beverages throughout the show (Paton, 2009). However, for every news report on a study about a benefit from alcohol, is a story highlighting the devastating effects alcoholism has, as well as crime reports and deaths associated with overconsumption of the drug (Paton, 2009). Overall, the general view of alcohol is that of admiration, in moderation.

Perhaps the most talked about drug today is marijuana. There are constantly reports on the news centered on it and every time elections come around, talk of legalization becomes common place. To date, two states have legalized the drug and many more have legalized it for medical use only. The medias reports on the drug have been interesting to follow as this seems to

be the drug that has been influenced the most by framing. When I was growing up, any report found about marijuana was a negative one, it's becoming a problem in the city, smoking it will ruin your life, etc. Over the past 20 years I have watched the reports and stories change first hand. Present day you still get a report preaching the dangers of marijuana but it is less common and stories typically center around the politics of marijuana or its laws and regulations. This was another drug that had ever changing depiction of it from the media, eighty years ago, marijuana was still legal before the passage of the Uniform State Narcotic Act (Schnackenberg, 2015). Before that, marijuana was depicted as another wonder drug and hemp was a major crop in the south. It wasn't until the 1900's that marijuana began to be framed negatively, after the Mexican revolution the influx of immigrants into the United States made the recreational use of marijuana common, and the media associated it's use with the immigrants and adopted the same fears and prejudices the immigrants did (Griffin, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

To Summarize, the media constantly changes the way it framed drugs. The powerful effects the media has on influencing public opinion and policy in the United States can be seen actions leading to the prohibition and its end, as well as the push for marijuana legalization among today's younger generation. It wasn't uncommon early on for drug companies to use the media as a way to influence consumers to use their product and deceiving techniques were common. Today, the media is still constantly adapting its opinion on America's vices as new information continually pours in.

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