

Young People's Perceptions of, and Engagement with, News Media Reporting on Illicit Drug Issues: An Australian Study

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Abstract

Illicit drug issues have a pervasive presence in mass media. Yet, despite 25 years of research exploring questions of bias, sensationalism and inaccuracies in news media portrayals of illicit drugs, how audiences engage with these portrayals (and their capacity to filter, interpret, deconstruct and even reconstruct media messages) has been neglected. Drawing on focus groups conducted in 2010 with 52 Australian young people aged 16–24 years, this article explores thought processes and reactions to three different news articles. It demonstrates that although young people bemoan the media's apparent sensationalism and bias towards illicit drug issues, their ability to interpret and reinterpret messages about drugs is shaped by four different characteristics: pre-existing knowledge and belief systems; media literacy skills; media framing; and frequency of the media message. Moreover, in spite of their distrust, this article demonstrates that young people remain highly engaged with, and dependent upon, news media for information about drug issues. Unmasking the drivers of media reliance and building skills to navigate the landscape is, thus, critical.

Introduction

In the era of the 24-hour news cycle, media has become an increasingly powerful institution in framing and responding to criminal justice issues (Cunningham and Turner 2010). Through selecting elements to make them more salient to audiences, newsmakers and the sources they cite have considerable power over what information is purveyed (Entman 1993). It has been well documented that, far from acting as 'messengers of the truth', media present criminal justice issues in often sensational, biased and inaccurate ways. The question thus arises: how will such media coverage impact on audiences?

One area where this is particularly pertinent concerns news media reporting on illicit drugs. More than 25 years of research has documented media distortions of the risk and threat posed by drugs to society, fuelling assertions that news media coverage has sparked moral panics about drug issues, heightened fear of drug use/drug users, and perpetuated a lack of appreciation of the causes, context and consequences of drug use in society (Beckett 1994;

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Bell 1985; Blood et al 2003; Brownstein 1991; Christie 1998; Elliott and Chapman 2000; Fan 1996; Forsyth 2001; Lawrence et al 2000; McArthur 1999; Miller 2010; Noto et al 2006; Reinerman and Levine 1989; Saunders 1998; Teece and Makkai 2000; Watts 2003).

Yet the focus of previous research into media reporting on illicit drug issues has been media-centric, and has neglected issues relating to audience *engagement* with and *interpretation* of news media. This is a critical omission. Media and communication theories suggest that audiences can filter, interpret, decode and even reconstruct media messages in ways that are divorced from any intention that message-producers may have had (Entman 1989; Hall 1980). Drawing upon focus groups with Australian young people aged 16–24 years, this article seeks to refocus the attention on the processes by which young audiences engage with, interpret and respond to news media coverage on drug issues.

Audience engagement with media reporting on drug issues has pertinence for young people for a number of reasons. First, research has documented that despite common assertions of declining participation, young people retain high levels of contact with traditional news media (Lancaster et al in press). Second, young adulthood is a critical time of socialisation and learning, during which media is thought to have an important influence (Arnett 1995). Third, the content domain (illicit drugs) has been nominated as one of the top issues of concern for young Australians (Mission Australia 2010). This is unsurprising given young adulthood is the time when most illicit drug use occurs. For example, the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) reported that in 2007 almost one quarter of 14–19 year old Australians had used an illicit drug (23.8%) and over half of 20–29 year olds had used an illicit drug (54%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008). Finally, other surveys have highlighted that many young drug users deem media to be one of their principal sources of information on drug issues. For example, a study published in 2004 indicated that 61% of cannabis users aged 15–18 years reported ‘consumption’ of television for information on drugs (however self-defined) (Copeland et al 2001).

This suggests that young people may have a ‘love-hate’ relationship with media (Denemark 2005), whereby news media both frustrates and yet is of critical importance to them. The limited research in this area raises further questions: Do young people believe that media reporting on drug issues is biased and sensational? If so, to what extent are young audiences capable of discerning such bias or inaccuracies, and what skills do they use to guide their interpretation of messages? Finally, how are young audiences using any retained information? This article takes an exploratory approach to examine audience engagement by young people with news media reporting on drugs. Drawing on focus groups with a total of 52 young people, the aim is threefold:

- to identify young people’s *impressions* of news media coverage on illicit drug issues;
- to identify key characteristics that guide young people’s *interpretation* of news media messages on illicit drugs; and
- to explore the potential *impacts* of news media coverage on young people’s attitudes to drugs.

This work is part of a broader study that endeavoured to analyse newspaper reporting of drug issues in Australia (Hughes et al 2011) and to measure the short-term impacts of news media on young people’s attitudes to drugs (Hughes et al 2010). This article begins by outlining the importance of audience interpretation, drawing upon theories of information processing. It then examines current understandings of how these mechanisms operate in relation to drug media coverage.

The importance of audience interpretation

Understandings of media effects on audiences have shifted over time. The most notable change has been an evolution from a post-war propaganda fear that media messages operate like a ‘hypodermic syringe’, automatically injecting audiences with stimulus, to the notion of media as a ‘negotiated influence’ upon knowledge, one where the recipient plays an active role in receiving and interpreting the information presented (Baillie 1996; Berelson et al 1954; Entman 1989; Glover 1985; McQuail 2005; Scheufele 1999). There are a number of schools of thought regarding information processing. The theories developed in these schools of thought include selective scanning, active processing, reflective integration and dual processing. These theories are all based on the supposition that it is not only the content of the media message that is significant, but also personal audience attributes that are likely to affect how an individual processes and remembers mediated communication (Geiger and Newhagen 1993).

Drawing upon psychological models, information processing theory suggests that individuals organise their thinking through systems of ‘schemas’ that store ‘substantive beliefs, attitudes, values, and preferences along with rules for linking different ideas’ (Entman 1989:349) and that media messages may be processed by means of a four-step process. First, an individual determines whether or not the media message is salient. If it is, the individual processes the information according to their schemas (their beliefs, attitudes and values). This may lead to retention or rejection of the information, and if retained, the information can influence attitudes. Information processing theories suggest there are multiple opportunities for audience agency to affect media interpretation.

The importance of information processing has been amply demonstrated in relation to media depictions of violence (for example, Anderson et al 2003; Brown and Witherspoon 2002; Brown 1996; Huesmann and Taylor 2006; Surette 2010) and sexual behaviour (for example Brown et al 2006; Brown et al 2005; Brown and Witherspoon 2002; Huston et al 1998; Taylor 2005), with both indicating that media effects are far from uniform and are instead affected by the nature of media messages and pre-existing audience attributes. For example, viewers with predispositions towards aggressive behaviours are much more likely to attend to and be affected by viewing violent material on television (Anderson et al 2003). Thus, it is not only the presence or nature of violent content, but also the individual characteristics of those who *choose* to attend to violent media that moderates media effects.

Media engagement may vary across media content domains due to differences in the nature of media content and/or intrinsic motivators. For example, uses and gratifications theory suggests that youth choose to use media for a variety of reasons, such as for self-socialisation or to seek information, and both their choice of and responses to media will vary depending upon factors such as access to and perceived credibility of other sources of socialisation (peers, family, schools etc) (Arnett 1995). The ability to generalise the extant literature to the specific content domain of illicit drugs thus remains unclear.

Media engagement on illicit drug issues

Given the limited exploration of audience engagement with media portrayals of drug issues, evaluations of drug prevention social marketing campaigns are instructive. These indicate that, similarly to other criminal justice content domains, information processing by

audiences is critical to moderating the message effect. Indeed, while such campaigns seek to reduce curiosity in drugs, evaluations have noted that messages may be *resisted* by the audience (and, hence, elicit no effect) (for discussion, see Babor et al 2010; Ritter et al 2011). Moreover, such campaigns can even *increase* curiosity in experimenting with the very drugs that audiences are being warned about. Equally importantly, the nature of effect appears moderated by the media content itself. Message resistance appeared higher with campaigns that exaggerated the dangers of drug use. Campaigns that have used more advanced strategic techniques, such as social marketing and focus group testing, have encountered less resistance from audiences, and have been shown to reduce interest in drugs — albeit to a limited extent and with different impacts across sub-populations (Blue Moon Research 2009; Hornik et al 2008; Nicholas 2002; Wakefield et al 2010). The extent to which these findings based on social marketing campaigns are able to be generalised to untargeted, mainstream media messages is untested. Indeed, there are likely to be important differences as social marketing and mainstream news represent fundamentally different approaches to media production, with the former being much more explicit in its objective of reducing drug use and the latter about information provision and social commentary (van Dijk 1996). Nevertheless, the findings suggest that young people's interpretation of and response to news media messages is likely to be affected by more than simply the content of the reports, including the extent to which messages accord with the pre-existing schemas of the individual audience members.

Methodology

In the study reported in this article, focus groups were conducted with a total of 52 young people aged 16–24 years who lived in Sydney, Australia. Non-probability sampling was used. Young people were recruited via street press and online advertisements in drug and youth forums. All advertisements emphasised that this was a study about media reporting, not illicit drug use *per se*. A small number of young people were also recruited via another component of the study, an online quantitative survey on media reporting and media effects (Hughes et al 2010).

The study's original intention was to group youth according to pre-existing attitudes to drugs. Ultimately, it was resolved that given the exploratory nature of the study, the research would be best conducted by not pre-supposing that drug use or attitudes to drug use were the driving factors that would influence media engagement on drug issues. Differences in attitudes towards, and interpretation of media reporting on, drug issues across some sub-groups (such as users versus non-users) have been covered elsewhere using a quantitative component of the study, with one key limitation being findings were limited by the pre-set groupings for analysis (Hughes et al 2010; Lancaster et al in press). Accordingly, for this component of the research, participants were deliberately not asked about their own experience of illicit drug use. Nor, were other demographic variables controlled for, such as place of residence, education or socio-economic status. Instead, the study mimicked designs from other research identifying that age and sex are key factors influencing media interpretation and, hence, divided the sample according to those attributes. There were two groups of 16–17 year olds (one male and two female groups) and three groups of 18–24 year olds (one male and two female groups). The final sample was made up of 33 females and 19 males. The lower number of males resulted from less initial expression of interest and a higher non-attendance rate. The mean age of the females was 20.5 years and the mean age of the males was 19.7 years.

All focus groups lasted 60–90 minutes. The focus groups were run by two of the researchers (CH and BS) at a hired venue in inner city Sydney. At the commencement of each focus group, a word association task was conducted whereby participants were asked to individually write down the first word that came to mind when considering news media reporting on illicit drugs. The words were collected anonymously and used to stimulate group discussion. Participants were invited to discuss the meaning of each of the different words, for example ‘biased’, and to give an example of how they thought the word related to media reporting on drugs. They were then asked to comment on what the collection of words indicated about their overall impressions of *how* the media reports on illicit drugs — for example, whether the words gave an overall positive or negative impression of the nature of media reporting. One young person missed this task, leaving a total of 51 young people who participated in this task.

Participants were then shown a series of three different articles taken from Australian newspapers. This set of articles was purposefully selected to represent extremes of current media coverage looking specifically at coverage on the two most commonly used drugs in Australia (cannabis and ecstasy) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008). A sample of 10 articles were initially identified by CH and KL from 2008 and 2009 coverage, then the team of five researchers discussed each and, through an iterative process, identified the three articles. As shown in Hughes et al (2011), canvassing six years of newspaper coverage (2003–2008), the most common topics about illicit drug use were criminal justice related (55.2%, 7.7% and 6.9% respectively covering criminal justice, drug-related crime and policy commentary on legal issues). Most articles had a neutral moral evaluation of drug use (55.2%). Yet, the relative proportion of each differed by drug types. Notably, ecstasy articles had increased coverage of potential health problems from illicit drug use (20.3% compared to 14.2% across drugs) and the potential benefits from drug use (3.0% compared to 1.9% across drugs). The final sample of articles used in the focus groups reflected this diversity:

- ‘Ecstasy “safer” than binge drinking’ in the *Brisbane Times* (Calligeros 2008);
- ‘Ecstasy death a “painful lesson”’ in *The Age* (2009); and
- ‘Tough new laws on cannabis use’ in *The Australian* (Preedy 2009).

The first two articles denoted different ecstasy portrayals. ‘Ecstasy “safer” than binge drinking’ (Calligeros 2008) was chosen as the most explicitly ‘pro’ ecstasy article that could be found. The article reported a claim from a drug and alcohol expert that, compared with drinking a substantial amount of alcohol, taking a small quantity of ecstasy was a ‘lesser evil’. A counterargument outlined some of the potential harms from ecstasy use. As noted above, articles highlighting the benefits of taking ecstasy represented 3.0% of Australian newspaper coverage on ecstasy in 2003–2008 (Hughes et al 2011). The second article, ‘Ecstasy death a “painful lesson”’ (*The Age* 2009), reported on an ecstasy overdose and included extensive quotes from family members and friends following the funeral of a 17-year-old girl (Gemma Thoms). The death was reported to have occurred following the ingestion of ecstasy tablets at an outdoor music festival (Big Day Out) because of a fear of law enforcement detection. Ecstasy articles on health problems constituted about 20.3% of ecstasy articles in 2003–2008 (Hughes et al 2011). The final story denoted a cannabis portrayal. ‘Tough new laws on cannabis use’ (Preedy 2009) represented a law enforcement policy commentary that outlined the introduction of new cannabis laws in Western Australia. The new laws included bans on the sale of all smoking implements and paraphernalia, and new police powers to frisk people for drugs

and weapons. Policy commentary on law enforcement represented 5.5% of coverage on cannabis and broader criminal justice issues represented 64.0% coverage on cannabis in 2003–2008 (Hughes et al 2011).

Participants were shown each article separately and asked to comment on the following: their immediate impressions; what guided their interpretation of the articles; and the potential impacts of the article on young people's perceptions of illicit drugs and drug use behaviour. After each article was discussed separately, participants were asked whether or not they perceived the set of articles to be typical or atypical of media reporting on illicit drugs and to identify the dominant portrayals of drugs presented in these articles. Focus groups concluded by asking participants to suggest ways in which media reporting on illicit drugs could be improved.

Knowing that visual factors such as photographs, page layout, colour etc have been shown across fields to affect interpretation of media messages, the aim of this exploratory work was to control for these variables so as to better understand the interpretation of the content of the news text itself. Accordingly, all articles were presented in the same font and format and without images or information about the publication source or the journalist. It is for this reason that other news formats such as television and radio were also excluded.

The discussions in all focus groups were recorded and transcribed but the participants' anonymity was maintained. Participants were reimbursed A\$70 for their time and travel expenses. Thematic analysis was used to identify the messages derived by the participants from each of the articles together with any common factors that affected media interpretation. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying factors that were likely to affect participants' attitudes towards illicit drug use.

Results

Young people's scepticism of news media reporting on illicit drugs

The free form word association task revealed that news media reporting on illicit drugs was viewed in a predominantly negative manner by the 16–24 year olds. As shown in Table 1, almost half of the participants thought that news media was sensational/melodramatic and/or biased. News media was also perceived to be out-of-touch, deceitful and patronising to young people. Only 4% of the young people said unprompted that the media was informative.

The dominant perception that the news media is sensationalist and biased suggests that most of the young people in the focus groups considered media reporting on drugs to be 'truths not told properly' (20-year-old female). That is, they viewed news media as a selected and fabricated account of illicit drug use, that was 'detached from the real world' (22-year-old female); one that ignored the scale of drug use, the causes of drug use, the pleasure associated with use, and the real risks of drug use and detection.

Like when they say "we caught 15 people with drugs at this festival" and we know there would've been 10,000 people (22-year-old female).

Table 1: Words associated with news media reporting on illicit drugs, identified by 16–24 year olds

| Theme | Number | Percentage |
|--|-----------|-------------|
| Sensational/melodramatic | 13 | 25.4% |
| Biased/targeted/one-sided | 10 | 19.6% |
| Out of touch/naive/ridiculous/funny | 4 | 7.8% |
| Negative | 4 | 7.8% |
| Deceitful | 2 | 3.9% |
| Patronising | 1 | 2.0% |
| Boring | 1 | 2.0% |
| Informative | 2 | 3.9% |
| Confronting | 1 | 2.0% |
| Portrayals of drug busts/illegality | 4 | 7.8% |
| Associated with youth/youth activities | 2 | 3.9% |
| Associated with negative health or social consequences | 3 | 5.9% |
| Other – mixed, high frequency/scant coverage/“news” | 3 | 5.9% |
| Total | 51 | 100% |

Participants recognised that topics are selectively filtered in (eg a young person dying from drugs) or out (eg wealthy and/or successful people who habitually use drugs). They also recognised that journalists play an active role in constructing how illicit drugs are reported.

With celebrities, the way it's reported it's not as negative as it is for kids doing drugs ... If George Michael is caught in his car with cocaine it's just news (20-year-old female).

Participants were particularly aware of what they saw as the implicit and explicit agendas behind the construction of media portrayals of drugs. They argued that this was done to reinforce the link between drug use and negative consequences, with one young person going so far as to say that the media 'emotionally blackmails' (24-year-old male) media consumers.

There is no such thing as healthy drug use, that's what they're trying to portray. It's like one thing leads on to another (17-year-old female).

It's sort of like, instead of reporting news, they're trying to tell you not to have drugs (19-year-old male).

Many participants noted how the moralistic tones were particularly strong when reporting on issues relating to young people. In one sense this was seen as understandable and driven by preventative desires/agendas.

I guess they feel that they have a responsibility for younger people to point out the dangers or whatever (20-year-old female).

Yet the majority of participants believed that the media uses young people as easy targets and scapegoats for society's need to condemn drug use.

Maybe they do feel they have a role in commentating on younger people using drugs and stuff, but I wouldn't believe that they're doing it to help young people rather than they have an agenda and want to sell newspapers (20-year-old female).

A number of apparent contradictions in participants' comments about their media engagement also emerged. Firstly, some participants argued that the dominance of negative, unrealistic and sensational reporting, particularly that targeted young people, had resulted in apathy towards media reporting on drugs.

It creates a lot of apathy I think with people of our age (17-year-old male).

It is ironic that despite claiming to have turned away from the media, those 'apathetic' young people still recognised and judged what news media was saying about illicit drug issues. This reinforces findings that 66.4% of young Australians have weekly or more frequent contact with news media (Lancaster et al in press).

Secondly, in spite of the sense that news media did not report the 'truth', young people relied on and expected the media as an institution to play the role of an information provider.

If we think it's biased and out of touch and we're really taking it seriously, then it's not really doing its job (22-year-old female).

Participants further emphasised that the news media was missing an opportunity to better inform young people about the nuanced issues that they really want covered on drugs, that is, 'real information that you can actually rely on' (17-year-old female). This suggests that, as previously intimated, the young Australians within the focus groups had a complex 'love-hate' relationship with media reporting on illicit drug issues.

Potential effects on attitudes to drug use

The focus groups indicated that young people may have quite sophisticated understandings of the ways in which media may affect them and their peers, and how this may influence their attitudes to drug use. When showing the series of articles, participants' reactions to news media coverage were grouped into three (extreme) categories: increasing fears; reducing fears; and no effect.

As suggested by core critics of drug media content, media may increase fears of drug use (Reinarman and Levine 1989). This may be done by promoting the nature, severity or likelihood of risks arising from illicit drug use or highlighting detrimental consequences of drug use for peers, family or the individual drug user.

I would read this and say "Nah - not taking drugs.... scary, scary" (20-year-old female).

You don't ever want to be that grieving person; you don't want any of your friends to go through that. So I think it's quite effective in deterring people (22-year-old female).

Conversely, news coverage on drugs may reduce fears or perceptions of risks associated with drug use or increase perceptions of the acceptability of use. This may be done by highlighting benefits, allaying fears, providing a justification or provoking rebellion.

A lot of teenagers ... they're a bit tight and so if they read this and they're like ... "I can have a good night if I buy a [A]\$15 ecstasy pill instead of spending [A]\$30 on alcohol". They'll take that option (16-year-old male).

I think it'd make people who're scared to take their first pill - I reckon it'd encourage them to do that (19-year-old male).

Finally, media coverage can elicit no effect, particularly if messages are deemed irrelevant or not credible to young people.

If you look at that kind of reporting it's completely useless (22-year-old female).

It pretty much leaves you in the same position ... your position doesn't change (16-year-old male).

Between these extremes more moderate effects were also observed. For example, that media increased attention to the harms of drug use *within* particular circumstances or contexts of use (something examined below).

The focus group participants also noted that media effects may be direct or indirect. Media may directly impact on attitudes (or behaviour) particularly if the news is seen or heard just before a young person is put in a relevant context. This was illustrated in response to the 'Ecstasy "safer" than binge drinking' article:

Just imagine if someone read this on Thursday or something and they went out on the Friday night and someone offered them ecstasy... You'd be more inclined to say yes because you've got that (in your) mind... you know 'this guy told me it'll be safer' (23-year-old female).

Alternatively, media may have an indirect impact, influencing discussions with family and peers.

You don't need to read the newspaper to get the message, because what happens is, one kid hears something "Oh let's get on ecstasy, it's better than drinking". And then you get some kind of quoted idiot who kind of does it and thinks that they're backed up by the newspaper (20-year-old female).

Some participants noted that these impacts will often be short- to medium-term.

My problem with this article is that it gets stale after a while. Not to say it's not a good article. But, you read this, for two days you're kind of sad. For two weeks you're kind of conscious of drugs and then a year later you're back there sitting with your friends ... (20-year-old female).

Alternatively, others believed that impacts can be long term, even if young people do not want it to be.

It's because of articles like this that I even remember Anna Woods' name [16-year-old who died after taking ecstasy]. I don't remember anyone's name who died in Iraq or in what I consider to be more serious problems (24-year-old male).

This suggests that there is likely to be heterogeneity in how young people use and react to news media on illicit drugs in terms of the direction of any effect and whether any elicited effect will be direct or indirect and short or long term.

What 'shapes' media interpretation?

The focus groups identified a number of factors that shaped young people's interpretation of media reports on illicit drugs:

- pre-existing knowledge and belief systems;
- media literacy skills;
- media framing; and
- frequency of the media message.

Pre-existing knowledge and belief systems

Participants invariably related the articles to their own or their peers' experiences with drug use in order to create meaning and to accept or reject messages. In doing so, it became apparent that depending on an individual's personal or vicarious experience with drug use, the 'Ecstasy death a "painful lesson"' article communicated different messages about the risks of ecstasy use *per se* versus the risks of *harmful* patterns of use. Accordingly, some participants saw this as a deterrent to using ecstasy, while others identified messages about the risks of using large quantities of ecstasy at once or at music festivals like Big Day Out.

I think that would convince me not to take drugs. Just 'cause... I feel sorry for her... I mainly feel sorry for the parents honestly, 'cause I don't want to see my parents, or any parents, or my friends to have to go through what they did (17-year-old male).

I don't think this makes people go "I'm going to die after a small amount of ecstasy", like, "ecstasy is going to kill me full stop". I think it goes, "a lot of ecstasy at once is going to kill you" (23-year-old female).

It says that there are authorities at Big Day Out so I think I would learn not to take ecstasy pills at events like that (17-year-old male).

The potential messages about the harms of use are particularly important and have not, to the knowledge of these authors, been previously identified.

Knowledge of the drug world, whether through personal experience, peers or other means, also affected message interpretation. The 'Ecstasy "safer" than binge drinking' article was deemed by many to be a 'media beat-up' that was not credible. For example, they argued that the implied message that 'ecstasy is safer' is only going to hold if ecstasy is 100% pure, used in small quantities, used on its own, and in a legal market. This hypothetical scenario ignores the reality that ecstasy is illegal, that ecstasy tablets are not pure and that most users in Australia will consume more than one pill and use multiple substances at once (Degenhardt and Hall 2010).

It's strange that people are actually tapping into ecstasy being safer but this is only provided that it's 100% MDMA in all the pills which are being sold... (But) you don't even buy ecstasy anymore, I mean what I hear, it's like you buy a pill and it's not ecstasy (20-year-old male).

I don't know what you are supposed to take from it. OK great, so we should go out and take ecstasy... but wait, ecstasy is illegal. There's no mention of ecstasy being illegal in there (20-year-old female).

This suggests that, consistent with the information processing theories, pre-existing schemas affect how young people respond to media reports and whether, as these cases exemplify, the messages will be filtered in or out (Entman 1989). It also suggests that any message that completely conflicts with their 'stance on drugs' (22-year-old female) or their personal or acquired knowledge on drugs will have limited, if any, effect.

Media literacy skills

The second factor affecting media interpretation was the extent to which participants were media savvy. The ability to discern and process messages was deemed critical for young people's ability to respond to media reporting on illicit drugs. Media literacy helped them to recognise and filter the explicit or implicit message. Study participants were also aware that young Australians vary in the extent to which they can discern or filter messages, and argued that 16–17 year olds were more prone to media influence.

If I was 16 and read that I would say, “I would not take ecstasy”, but like, when you’re older, it’s different (24-year-old female).

Maybe it’s just our age and our education level but we need something more definitive like research or something in the article before it would change anything that I thought about drugs. But ... younger people ... they’d just see the headlines and so that’s that (21-year-old female).

However, it was noticed that even amongst similar age groups there were differences in how participants interpreted and responded to messages. For example, some saw the article ‘Ecstasy “safer” than binge drinking’ as irresponsible media reporting: ‘wow, that should of [sic] never even made it to the press’ (23-year-old female). Yet, most participants implicitly rejected the notion of media as an ‘injector of knowledge’, arguing against the need to protect young people from any such messages. Instead, it was asserted that young people are much more media literate (and have much more power over media interpretation) than they are commonly given credit for.

Media framing

Given the power of media literacy skills, it is perhaps not surprising that the third factor that affected media interpretation was the media framing itself. It was apparent that the participants responded to and were aware of many aspects of framing, including the extent to which articles were seen as balanced (and presenting one or multiple views), the types of sources cited, the explicit/implicit message, the examples provided, and the overall tone of the article. The latter three aspects are elaborated on below.

The most important in terms of effects on attitudes to drug use was the explicit/implicit message about the risks of drug use. In the three newspaper articles this referred to whether the media portrayed drug use as ‘safe’, or as leading to police detection/intervention or else to fatal consequences. Of the three articles discussed, the ‘Ecstasy death a “painful lesson”’ was deemed the most persuasive and most likely to affect attitudes to drug use. Conversely, the ‘Tough new laws on cannabis use’ article was deemed the least persuasive – ‘If you look at that kind of reporting it’s completely useless’ (22-year-old female). One reason was the credibility of the depicted risk. Most perceived that laws and police powers posed a very low likelihood of detection, and that the new police powers did little to change the existing risk of detection.

They’re like “80 people were arrested on drugs charges” and young people are like, “it’s ridiculous, I’ll take that risk (cos) there are so many people that are taking drugs” (22-year-old female).

I think anyone who’s doing it I think they already know there’s risks involved so they’re probably just going to keep doing what they’re doing (24-year-old male).

These comments indicate the presence of sophisticated assessments about the depicted risk, both in terms of the likelihood of the risk occurring, plus the perceived severity of the depicted risk.

Other aspects of media framing were also important, including the examples used and tone of the article. While good use of examples was considered to aid an article’s credibility, poor use or misuse had the opposite effect. In particular, old examples, such as the ecstasy death of Anna Wood in 1995, were scoffed at.

If that’s the most recent example they can quote, then why on earth are they journalists? (20-year-old female).

More damaging were examples that were seen as untruthful. In this regard the ‘Tough new laws on cannabis use’ article received particular notoriety. The article noted a number of reasons for the legislative change including increased potency and psychiatric hospital admissions. Yet the examples utilised received condemnation for over-inflating the risks of drug use through reference to ‘lethal’ cannabis.

(Cannabis) doesn’t kill people. It’s not lethal so that’s a straight out lie (23-year-old male).

The tone of the articles was also important. Participants referred to the style of writing, most aptly contrasted as being emotive television soap or ‘Home and Away’ style (19-year-old male) versus a more neutral ‘SBS World News or ABC’ style (20-year-old male). For some participants, emotive articles such as ‘Ecstasy death a “painful lesson”’ were more compelling – ‘this would get to me much more than a bunch of statistical information’ (22-year-old female) – whereas for others this was much more likely to be rejected as being sensational. In contrast, neutral ‘SBS World News or ABC’ reporting received almost universal praise:

The way it’s written isn’t like too bad I mean it’s not really sensationalised. It’s just facts you know (22-year-old male).

This one’s the most informative and objective. It doesn’t seem like it has an agenda. It’s kind of just telling you what the laws are going to be and what they’re thinking of doing.... It lets you formulate your own opinion on it (20-year-old female).

This suggests that the tone is important for young people, at least in increasing the chance that reports on drugs move through the initial information processing stages.

Frequency of the media message

The final factor identified as affecting young people’s interpretations was the extent to which media portrayals were common or atypical. This refers not only to the overall frequency of the message in the news media, but also the frames used to construct messages. For example, the gendered depictions of overdose victims were noted.

I don’t remember ever reading a story about a boy overdosing on ecstasy; it’s always a girl... (20-year-old female).

One consequence was that more atypical portrayals such as the ‘Ecstasy “safer” than binge drinking’ article, were more likely to be recalled.

I’m not sure that it’d make me take drugs in a heartbeat but it would definitely stick in my mind (more) than the negative media (22-year-old female).

For many different reasons, the messages deemed more frequent to young people were less likely to stick. The ‘law enforcement type’ portrayal, ‘Tough new laws on cannabis use’, was one example that was deemed less effective because of its commonality.

Another drug bust ... oh who cares, it just happens so often (17-year-old male).

Conclusion

This research has explored young people’s impressions of news media coverage on illicit drug issues. It used three specific news articles to elucidate the way they and their peers interpret, negotiate and are affected by such media. The small sample and exploratory

approach mean the findings cannot be generalised to be representative of the views of all young people. Replication and extension of this research with other audiences of young people is, thus, warranted. Other limitations include that the focus groups explored reactions to only three newspaper articles. Other types of articles or other media formats may well elicit different responses. Participant's interpretation of de-identified news items may also not reflect the way they would normally read them (where they have additional potential influences of familiarity with tabloid or broadsheet format, relevance of page number, recognition of journalist names, presence of photography and graphics etc). Finally, while the focus groups implicitly suggested that young Australians' schemas and modes of engagement with news media on drug issues were inherently informed by the broader social and political context in which drug issues are framed, the roles of these and other cultural factors in shaping discourse and engagement have not been explicitly examined herein.

Nevertheless, this research adds to the current literature on media reporting on drug issues in a number of ways. First, it shows that many young people concur with drug media critics, that media coverage on illicit drug issues is sensational and biased. Yet, it also indicates that in spite of the media's apparent sensationalism and bias towards illicit drug issues, young people remain highly engaged with and dependent upon news media for information about drug issues. Second, the research demonstrates that media can increase fear of drugs, but that it can also provide a justification for use, incite rebellion or increase perceptions of risk regarding high risk patterns of use. It can also elicit both indirect and direct effects. Third, this study identified four factors that appeared to influence young people's processing of messages on drug issues. What is apparent is that media content itself is but one influence. Even then media content is not monolithic and is shaped by the frequency of the media message, the tone and the sources cited — factors more commonly identified within media content analyses. Equally importantly, just as in the violence domains, young people's capacity to engage, reject or reinterpret media content appeared also influenced by pre-existing schemas and media literacy skills.

How these factors intersect (synergistically, antagonistically etc), in what circumstances and for whom, remains unclear. Yet, the results bring to light the danger of assuming that all media content will necessarily elicit the same reactions, or that all populations of young Australians will be equally affected. The broader research from which this study arises provides some support for this hypothesis. Quantitative analyses with 2,296 young people aged 16–24 years indicated that health and social portrayals were much more likely to increase perceptions of risk than criminal justice portrayals (Hughes et al 2010). Moreover, females and participants who had never used drugs were more likely to report increased perceptions of risk than males and non-recent and recent drug users.

Conceptualised in this way, this research leads to the tentative suggestion that the previous research focus on the production side of media reporting of drug issues has overemphasised the potential unilateral influence of media. For example, consistent with findings from other drug media research (Beckett 1994; Bell 1985; Blood et al 2003; Brownstein 1991; Christie 1998; Elliott and Chapman 2000; Fan 1996; Forsyth 2001; Lawrence et al 2000; McArthur 1999; Miller 2010; Noto et al 2006; Reinerman and Levine 1989; Saunders 1998; Teece and Makkai 2000; Watts 2003), the young people in this study desired more balanced and 'truthful' reporting. More than this, however, this research suggests that even if media reporting on drugs is biased or distorted towards particular portrayals, young people are likely to apply media literacy skills that allow them to see

through the bias and make active decisions about the information presented to them by the media.

Equally importantly, the focus on media production appears to have led to an undervaluing and lack of appreciation of the multifaceted role that news media coverage on drug issues plays in young people's lives — one where it can simultaneously frustrate, inform and educate today's young people. The fact that young people perceive media to be educating them about the risks of using drugs in particular contexts, and through particular routes, poses a real challenge to the extant literature on drugs and broader criminal justice media content domains (one where containment of media access or type is often the proffered solution, particularly for younger audiences) (see, for example, Anderson et al 2003; Blood and McCallum 2005). The burgeoning media environment, the continued dominance of drug issue as a core concern to young Australians and the identified desire among focus group participants to 'tune in', and not 'tune out', leads these authors to contend that young people's reliance on news media surrounding illicit drug issues is likely to continue. This creates an onus to extend and replicate this research so as to elucidate *why* young people are engaging with news media on drug issues. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the drivers of the reliance upon news as an information source on drug issues is, in large part, a reflection of the scarcity of alternate sources that are deemed credible to young people (Copeland et al 2001). If supported, this would suggest there is a real need to better appreciate the role of media as 'information provider' to young Australians and to unmask the skills that can be used to navigate the media landscape.

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