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Is There a Largely Consistent Discourse on Drugs in the UK Press?

Tabloid or Broadsheet, Left-Leaning or Right, Does It Make Much Difference?

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Abstract

It has been argued that UK newspaper portrayals of illicit drug use tend to be sensationalist, exaggerated, distorted, out of context (Coomber, 1994) and highly stereotypical (Power, 1989). Contrastingly, research on Australian newspaper portrayals of illicit drug use has argued that such portrayals tend largely to occur during periods of heightened public concern around specific drugs or topics, with this set against a background of largely neutral portrayals (Hughes et al., 2011). Whilst many nations are liberalising their approaches to drug use, the UK is not, so newspaper representations take on an added significance in relation to how they influence policy (Hughes et al., 2011; Silverman, 2011; UKDPC, 2012; Tieberghien, 2014; Gstrein, 2018). We revisit the debate on UK newspaper representations of drug use, looking at tabloids and broadsheets, politically left and right leaning, and whether these factors make a significant difference to how representations are articulated. In doing so, we briefly outline the concepts of *occasioning* and *characterisation* and suggest that they might be a useful addition to the analysis of drug-related newspaper stories. We examine a sample of 76 UK national newspaper articles, from three tabloids (*The Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*) and three broadsheets (*The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to consider how representations are articulated. Non-stigmatising and sympathetic representations regarding drugs and users are found, but these are very rare. Far more common is a stigmatising discourse, featuring negative words, phrases and metaphors, articulated consistently, irrespective of whether the newspapers are tabloid or broadsheet and regardless of their political perspective. The only significant difference is that right leaning newspapers publish more of these stigmatising articles. Whilst we may suspect this to be the case, it is significant to confirm this empirically. This reality continues to impede a more informed discussion of the issues, continues to misinform governmental policy and may affect some users themselves.

Keywords: drugs, media, representation, newspapers, substance use, deviance.

Introduction

Existing research argues that UK newspaper portrayals of drugs and users tend to be sensationalist, exaggerated, distorted, out of context (Coomber, 1994) and highly stereotypical (Power, 1989). However, research from Australia found that such portrayals tended to occur around specific drugs or topics, often during periods of heightened public concern, against a background of typically neutral portrayals (Hughes et al., 2011). This led us to wonder whether there might be anything particular to UK press portrayals of drug use that might explain why they tend to be more negative than those found elsewhere?

Our research uses a Critical Discourse Analysis approach (CDA) to examine representations in UK national newspapers during early 2019. At a time when many other countries have liberalised/are liberalising their approach to drug use, the UK remains steadfast in its opposition to doing so. The Misuse of Drugs Act (1971), which classifies prohibited substances into classes A, B and C remains in place. Indeed, the prohibitory approach in the UK was reinforced in 2016 by the introduction of the Psychoactive Substances Act. This piece of law simply banned all psychoactive substances, with a list of exceptions. It is our view that one reason why the UK sticks so adamantly to a prohibitory approach is to do with the stories that we, as a society, continue to tell ourselves about drugs use, often through the UK press. A body of work exists that explores the ways and extent to which media representations of drug use influence governmental policy (Hughes et al., 2011; Silverman, 2011; UKDPC, 2012; Tieberghien, 2014; Gstrein, 2018). Discussing such issues in the UK, Silverman (2011) writes the following:

... there is no field of public affairs which reflects the media influence more vividly than that of drugs [...] a small number of newspaper editors have acted as a policy “satnav”, which ministers have followed almost slavishly in their desire to send “messages”, with the outcome that drug classification has become ludicrously detached from drug harm. (p. 31)

Existing literature indicates that tabloids are more stigmatising (UKDPC, 2010) and that contrasting approaches between differing forms of newspaper exist (Manning, 2014). Other literature, however, indicates that there is not any guarantee that broadsheet newspapers are more reliable than tabloids as regards the factuality of their drug reporting, nor are they necessarily any less sensationalist (Coomber, 1995). Our research seeks to empirically confirm whether significant differences exist or not. Is there one largely consistent type of discourse to be found in the UK press’s reporting of drug-related stories? If so, this could be part of an explanation as to why the UK lags behind other nations who are changing to more liberal approaches to drug policy, because those messages are being drowned out.

A Sensationalist Media Regarding Drugs and Users

The extent to which the media is sensationalist in relation to drug use is recognised within existing literature. Murji (2000) considers how the media marginalises, ‘demonises’ and misrepresents drug users, with dramatic images influencing drug policy. Media portrayals and moral panic encourage possibly punitive responses, with societal views being influenced by the media (Murji, 2000). For those readers unfamiliar with the concept of moral panic, Cohen (1972) defined it as something which happens when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media ...” (p. 1).

Such misrepresentation is also found by Coomber et al. (2000), who recognise the exaggeration regarding illegal drugs in newspapers and identify a lack of quality control mechanisms regarding the accuracy of reporting of this issue. Significantly, they argue that broadsheets are no better in this regard than tabloids.

Coomber (1995) recognises the power of headlines, expressing clearly and concisely extreme dangers regarding drugs and users. He considers media discourse with reference to powerful metaphors (e.g., drug ‘epidemic’), arguing that such language causes fear through creating “an image of contamination” (p. 119).

Newsworthiness is also a significant factor regarding media reporting of drug-related stories. One aspect of this relevant to our work is what initially triggers news coverage and how this possibly influences positive, negative or overall neutral portrayals. UKDPC (2012) found that the most popular trigger for drug-related news stories in the UK press was ‘Criminal justice related.’ This and others, such as death, arguably lend themselves to more sensationalist reporting. However, this is significant not just for triggering reporting, or as we will later discuss it the *occasioning* of drug-related reporting, but for the type of relationship between journalist and source. Carlson (2009) examines this relationship, proposing that three types of relationship exist. Reporting from courtrooms is clearly an example of the second type, in which reporting becomes “dominated by sources who set the cultural definition of events and problems” (p. 1). This domination increases the likelihood of official prohibition-type discourses shaping and framing the narratives produced and reproduced in UK newspaper articles about drugs and users.

Further to the idea of a sensationalist media discourse, Cobbina (2008) argues that moral panics also pressurise the government to take action (Cobbina, 2008), encouraging punitive responses regarding drug users. Cobbina (2008) specifically considers the moral panic regarding ‘crack’ cocaine, with reference to the regular occurrence of words such as ‘plague’ or ‘crisis’ in the news. She further considers how the focus on ‘crack’ could be related to the social group recognised as using the drug (with ‘crack’ having carried racialised connotations since the 1980s). In addition, media sensationalism regarding drugs is also recognised by Manning (2014), who considers how stories regarding drugs in the news are often stories about crime and criminal justice. Newspaper coverage frequently involves a link between drug use and crime (UKDPC, 2010), again reinforcing punitive responses.

The media is hugely responsible for the stigmatisation of drug users, with representations that shock, create fear and suggest danger. Lloyd (2013) recognises the role of the media in the stigmatisation of problem drug users (PDUs), noting how the consequences of such stigma on PDUs include the devastating influence “on their sense of self-worth” (p. 90), with a rise in the dangers associated with needle sharing. Lloyd (2013) recognises the need to challenge the stigmatising discourse and representations in the media, which largely suggest an association with crime using language such as ‘drug crazed’ and ‘evil.’ Similarly, Kennedy and Valleriani (2007) argue that the stigma related to PDUs is strengthened through the media, which can be related to how news media suggests a narrow pathway with regards to recovering from addiction. This encourages the marginalisation of those who do not manage to follow this strict path. A connection can also be drawn to Chalmers et al. (2016) who argue that the rise in the stigmatisation of a drug by the media, through the use of terms such as ‘epidemic,’ is likely to encourage the under-reporting of lifetime usage, creating unreliability regarding prevalence statistics. Furthermore, Meehan (2017) likewise notes how younger drug users report feelings of exclusion, which prevents them seeking support. This stigma is consistently reproduced through the media, media campaigns and in school-based drug education.

Differences according to the form of media are recognised, with some possibly having more stigmatising tendencies. For example, the UK Drug Policy Commission (UKDPC, 2010) notes that it was in the tabloid press that drug users had a greater likelihood of being condemned: “around a fifth of users were condemned” (p. 8). An association can be made here to Manning (2014), who recognised the contrast in approaches between forms of media or newspapers. He suggested that in relation to the same drugs stories, it is often different parts of the story that are emphasised by what he refers to as ‘up-market qualities,’ ‘mid-market’ and ‘popular papers’ (p. 20). However, Coomber (1995) notes that whilst possible variation according to the form of media may exist, the *overall* message may be the same. Our paper looks to see whether this is the case.

Varying Media Representations of Drugs

Existing research suggests that media representations regarding drug use vary according to which social groups are recognised as using the drugs, with ethnic minorities and the working-class groups experiencing stigmatisation and blame. Reinerman and Levine (1997) note the concentration on ‘crack’ in the media in America in the 1980s, as it became associated with ‘ghettos’ and ‘barrios.’ Similarly, Cobbina (2008) considers how the print media’s representation of the drugs ‘crack’ cocaine and methamphetamine were largely dependent on the ethnicity and social class of the perceived users, with official responses influenced by these representations. Her study demonstrates that references to ‘crack’ cocaine in the media were predominantly associated with African Americans and crime. However, when poor Whites were referred to alongside methamphetamine in the print media, public health tended to be the focus. Cobbina (2008) emphasises the connection between media representations and drug policy; moral panic over ‘crack’ encourages punitive controls. Cobbina (2008) draws attention to how moral panic around ‘crack’ benefitted policymakers, diverting attention from unemployment, poverty and other structural social problems. A connection can also be made here to Kennedy and Valleriani (2017), who consider how the connection between drug use and crime is particularly portrayed regarding drugs such as ‘crack’ cocaine, with particular users specifically focused on and ‘demonised’ by the media and policy. Becker (2001) argues that of the three aspects involved in the process by way of which a substance becomes defined with the negative connotations of a ‘drug,’ who the users are is the most important. We would suggest that it is who the users are *portrayed as being*, not who they necessarily are in reality, which is most important. This leads us to propose the concept of *characterisation* later in this paper and to attend to how characters in drug-related newspaper articles are articulated and how this effects the overall tone of the article.

Existing literature also discusses how the attention given to different drugs in the media is far from equal. Manning (2006) recognises the way that moral panic regarding drug use is apparent in the media when there is an association with particular social groups. He further notes how issues regarding volatile substance abuse (VSA) and ecstasy did not gain the same attention in newspapers in the 1990s. As an explanation regarding the greater attention given to ecstasy, Manning (2006) looks to how the issue regarding VSA is most common in relation to the more marginalized, compared to ecstasy which he argues was as threatening to the more ‘decent’ in society. Initially, it may appear that there is a contradiction between this argument and ones previously considered. Moral panics tend to be formed around drugs that are used by marginalized groups (e.g., crack), whereas Manning (2006) argues that lower media attention is found around VSA as compared to ecstasy, because volatile substances are used by marginalized groups. What explains this apparent contradiction in this part of the literature is an uncomfortable truth; Manning (2006) is primarily looking at drug-related deaths. This suggests that the lives of drug users from marginalized groups are primarily valued re the symbolic work that can be done using them as examples. If their deaths are underreported than certainly their lives must be valued less, at least in certain respects. Supporting this interpretation, Forsyth (2001) suggests that newspapers publicise some drug-related deaths far more frequently than others, depending on the drug in question. Deaths relating to ‘recreational’ drugs including ecstasy were more commonly written about and there was also greater publicising of drug deaths relating to teenage females (Forsyth, 2001). Media representations are biased according to who is using the drug, with reporting varying according to age, gender and ethnicity. Forsyth (2001) argues that drug policy could be greatly affected by the misrepresentation regarding illegal drug deaths in the media. UKDPC (2010) recognise the variation regarding how often different users were referred to in the newspaper coverage and the way in which they were presented. Results suggest that professionals and celebrities (often connected with cocaine use), and youths (often associated with cannabis and ecstasy) appeared mostly in newspapers in relation to their drug use. The frequency in which offenders and parents (often

connected to heroin) appear was far lower and they had a greater likelihood of being condemned, particularly in the tabloids, with labels such as ‘junkie.’

Further research considers the media’s focus on young people and drug use, in which it also encourages concern or fear through highlighting a threat to the innocent. Kohn (1994) considers the media and the focus on young victims regarding illegal drugs. An example includes the *Daily Telegraph*’s reporting in 1983 of a twelve-year-old who had, allegedly, been approached by drug dealers outside school. In recognising the extremity in the media, Kohn (1994) notes use of “all the big metaphors” (p. 232), specifically in the *Daily Mirror*, which urged its readers and parents to fight what they called an ‘epidemic.’ A study by Shaw et al. (2010) considers British media representations regarding celebrity drug use and the influence on young people. Despite concern that media focus on celebrity drug users could encourage use among youths, their study which involves accessing UK national newspapers, suggests this widely held assumption is largely over simplified and an exaggeration. This was particularly reflected in their study by how young people took a critical approach in relation to the drug use of the celebrity, Amy Winehouse. Montagne (2011) also notes how young drug users are dubious of media information, specifically on the internet. They often question media messages regarding drugs, as opposed to simply accepting them.

Method and Methodology

This research set out to revisit the debate on UK newspaper representations of drug use, looking at tabloids and broadsheets, politically left and right leaning newspapers and whether these factors make a significant difference to how representations are articulated. We were interested in examining whether discourses were stigmatising or not and whether they were primarily positive or negative in the words, phrases and metaphors that they used in articulating representations of drugs and users.

Lexis Library archive was used, with three national tabloid and three national broadsheet newspapers selected to form the sample. Only national newspapers were selected as they have bigger readerships and are therefore perhaps more influential. The particular newspapers were also chosen on the basis that they were the best-selling within the tabloid and broadsheet types (Agility, 2017). The sample included newspapers on the left and right of the political spectrum. The newspapers selected were:

Table 1. Newspaper, format and political leaning.

Newspaper	Format	Political leaning
<i>The Mirror/The Sunday Mirror</i>	Tabloid	Left of centre
<i>The Sun</i> (England)	Tabloid	Right of centre
<i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>	Tabloid	Right of centre
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> (London)/ <i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> (London)	Broadsheet	Right of centre
<i>The Times</i> (London)/ <i>The Sunday Times</i> (London)	Broadsheet	Right of centre
<i>The Guardian</i> (London)	Broadsheet	Left of centre

Another significant decision in relation to constructing this research sample included selecting the timeframe within which the articles were published. The week starting on Saturday 19th January 2019, and ending Friday 25th January 2019 was randomly chosen. A one-week timeframe is of course modest, but it provided a manageable number of articles to analyse (qualitative research is less tied to the idea of large-scale samples than quantitative research) and significant claims to generalisability are not made. Overall, 76 newspaper articles were included in the sample. The search term ‘drug’* was entered into Lexis Library, which meant that articles with the terms ‘drug’ or ‘drugs’ would be identified. The search was also adapted in a way which meant that the term could appear anywhere in the article, not restricting it to the headline.

A mixed methods approach was chosen, employing a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to reflect upon the particular narratives, metaphors and phrases that were articulated. CDA, for those readers who are unfamiliar with this approach, has been described as “... a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities” (Mullet, 2018, p. 1). Analysis took the form of a pen and paper approach as opposed to using software, which is the preference of the authors, with the feeling that it gets the researcher closer to the data. In addition, a basic content analysis was used, to make a comparison between newspaper types. In practice, this involved counting how many of the themes appeared in the broadsheets and the tabloids, or in each type of broadsheet (e.g., *The Guardian*) and tabloid (e.g., *The Sun*), identifying whether certain newspapers tended to focus on certain themes and be more stigmatising. Themes can be understood very simply as what is being discussed. Themes were identified by way of the close reading required under the use of CDA. Both researchers were involved in this, agreeing upon the interpretation that this necessarily involves. Variation between right leaning and left leaning newspapers was also recorded, revealing whether one was inclined to be more sensationalist. It was also important to document the number of times that dominant or consistent themes appeared altogether, noting which themes or language appeared most frequently and whether these were related to derogatory representations. The length of the articles was another fundamental form of numerical data to note; it would be recorded whether a certain newspaper type (e.g., broadsheets or tabloids) tended to write

lengthier articles on drugs, and if this added to further demonization or panic. On average, broadsheet articles were longer (average word length 696 words) than tabloid articles (average word length 335 words). As noted above, we discuss whether the users were characterised in a sympathetic, unsympathetic, or neutral manner. This became evident throughout our research, when noting the recurring themes and that those portrayed as innocent from higher social classes, for example, were far more likely to be portrayed sympathetically. Such groups might be referred to in a less derogatory or more neutral manner. In contrast we recognised how certain social groups (e.g., relating to minority ethnic groups or the working class) might be referred to in a more unsympathetic manner, with derogatory language, phrases, metaphors, etc. However, sympathetic, neutral or matter of fact reporting was a much rarer occurrence throughout the articles, as opposed to the dominant demonising/stigmatising media discourse.

What the ‘Papers Say

This section discusses the key themes that were identified during the analysis of the newspaper articles. We examine 47 tabloid articles (*The Mirror* n = 11, *The Sun* n = 26, *The Daily Mail* n = 10) and 29 broadsheet articles (*The Telegraph* n = 8, *The Times* n = 13, *The Guardian* n = 8). Whilst the broadsheet articles are fewer, they are also, as might be expected, longer. The themes are discussed in order of how many times they were found to have occurred within the sample.

The findings are summarised in this table:

Table 2. Summary of findings

Theme	Number of times present	Number of times present in tabloid	Number of times present in broadsheet
Drugs and violent crime	32	16	16
Drugs and children/young, innocence and blame	22	9	13
Celebrity and drugs	10	9	1
Drugs, users and a lack of morality	6	5	1
Drug users in need of support	3	1	2

Drugs and violent crime

This theme involved the articulation of drugs and users having been related/linked to violent crime. The theme of drugs and violent crime was identified in all six newspapers, occurring in 32 articles. The theme occurred 16 times in each newspaper form (tabloids $n = 16$, broadsheets $n = 16$). This is interesting in itself, because there were less broadsheet articles ($n = 29$) than tabloid articles ($n = 47$), so a higher overall proportion of broadsheet articles focussed on this alarming theme. The theme is evident amongst newspapers which lean towards both ends of the political spectrum, but it is interesting to note that the theme occurred more often in right leaning newspapers:

Tabloids: *The Mirror* ($n = 2$), *The Sun* ($n = 7$), *The Daily Mail* ($n = 7$). Note that both right-leaning newspapers printed seven stories on this theme, compared to the left-leaning *Mirror*'s two stories.

Broadsheets: *The Guardian* ($n = 4$), *The Telegraph* ($n = 4$), *The Times* ($n = 8$). Note that the right-leaning newspapers printed 12 stories on this theme, compared to the left-leaning *Guardian*'s four stories.

You may be thinking that there will be more articles on this theme in right-leaning newspapers, because there are more of those in the sample. This is a significant part of the issue though, as most national newspapers in the UK are right-leaning and as we have already said, the three chosen in the tabloid and broadsheet types are the best-selling, therefore arguably the most impactful.

Although our sample was analysed at a time when there was growing concern about violent crime (particularly knife-crime among young people), drug-related stories frequently are reports in relation to crime (Manning, 2014), so this theme being the most common is not unusual, nor necessarily an outcome of our modest sampling time frame. An example of the language that was typically identified in the articles includes:

'also heavily linked to drugs [regarding knife crime] – both through gangs arming themselves to defend their territories but by gang members' own drug abuse making them even more violent'
(*The Daily Telegraph* (London), Friday 25th January 2019)

As well as representing the social anxiety around knife crime, this quote also articulates a chemically deterministic view of how drugs affect human behaviour, which is highly questionable. Drug effects should be understood in relation to three sets of factors: "the relationships among personality (set), social structure (setting), and drug" (Zinberg, 1984, p. 172). Furthermore, shortly after this, there is a reference to this violent crime as an 'epidemic': 'help combat this epidemic.' Such language, or specifically metaphors, magnifies the scale of that which is being argued. Coomber (1995) recognised how such terminology creates a contaminated image that exemplifies fear. Such metaphorical language is also illustrated through the following:

'Away from the spotless beaches and infinity pools, the island is gripped by a violent crime epidemic rooted in drugs and gang culture.'
(*Daily Mail* (London), Saturday 19th January 2019)

This quote is taken from an article about the murder of a British man in St Lucia and represents how the media is skilful in its depiction of drugs and users. The emphasis is that even a place that may appear to be like paradise to visitors with 'spotless beaches and infinity pools' might also be a place of great danger, with the blame directed at drugs. This is again exaggerated and made possible through the use of rhetorical opposition

(between tourist areas and the ‘othered’ social environment of violence, gangs and drugs) and the metaphor ‘epidemic’ to emphasise the scale of the problem.

Another issue that was of considerable concern during the period being reflected upon was drugs and violence within the UK prison system. An article in *The Guardian*, in relation to prison violence and drugs, used the words:

‘Drug-fuelled violence is at an all-time high’
(*The Guardian* (London), Wednesday 23rd January 2019)

This quote represents the belief that violence or aggression is ‘fuelled’ by drugs. The term ‘fuelled’ is interesting in its’ vagueness. Whether readers understand it to mean ‘causal’ or ‘exacerbating,’ in some sense the suggestion is that drugs are to blame. Phrasing such as ‘all-time high’ has consistently been recognised throughout the newspaper articles, which intensifies panic and exaggerates the scale of the suggested problem. Overall this has therefore demonstrated the recurring theme in which drug users become subject to the label of ‘violent’ or ‘criminal.’ This has been an ongoing association made within newspaper coverage, as was demonstrated by the UKDPC (2010), and our research suggests the same.

Drugs, Children, Young People and ‘Youths’: Contrasting Articulations of Innocence and Blame

This theme involved drugs and users being articulated as a threat to the innocent (i.e. children), or the corruption of innocence. This theme was identified 22 times, with children/young people being articulated as primarily innocent 5 times, to blame 1 time and an overall balance of innocence and blame 16 times. The theme of drugs and children/young people is identified in all six newspapers. It is important to note that how these children/young people are articulated relates to issues of social class and ethnicity. Whether children are articulated as innocent or not is also partly subject to what the narrative is trying to achieve regarding other characters within the story, hence the concept of *characterisation* is important. In total, this theme appeared in 22 articles. This was a key theme in both tabloid and broadsheet papers, but with more articles about this in the broadsheets (tabloids n = 9, broadsheets n = 13). It was again in *The Times* (a right-leaning broadsheet) that this theme occurred most often, which totalled six articles in that newspaper. In addition, the longest article in the research sample was from *The Daily Telegraph* (a broadsheet), which consists of 2817 words relating to fear/panic. This theme was central to that article. The individual newspaper breakdown for this theme is:

Tabloids: *The Mirror* (n = 2), *The Sun* (n = 3), *The Daily Mail* (n = 4). Note that both right-leaning newspapers printed seven stories on this theme, compared to the left-leaning *Mirror*’s two stories.

Broadsheets: *The Guardian* (n = 2), *The Telegraph* (n = 5), *The Times* (n = 6). Note that the right-leaning newspapers printed 11 stories on this theme, compared to the left-leaning *Guardian*’s two stories.

Again, yes there are more right-leaning newspapers in the sample, but these are the best-selling newspapers and most UK newspapers are right-leaning anyway.

The theme of drugs and children, young people and ‘youths’ was mostly articulated in newspaper articles in relation to the heightened concern at that time around ‘county lines,’ where it is often reported that the young are being targeted by gangs to travel, sell and supply drugs. Depictions were created in these articles, with the mention of recruiting children from primary schools (*The Guardian*), by drugs gangs. As noted above,

growing gang concerns were evident throughout the newspapers. The following quote which relates to the ‘county lines’ phenomenon, is taken from *The Telegraph*:

‘A county lines drug dealer forced a 15-year-old London boy to travel to Swansea to deal heroin and crack cocaine’
(*The Daily Telegraph* (London), Friday 25th January 2019)

This articulates the corruption of innocence theme, where a “boy” is being sent from London to sell drugs in Swansea. A strong adult/child discursive opposition is articulated in this quote and the overall article, between *characterisation* of ‘the 15-year-old London boy’ and the drug dealer - who is later revealed to be 20 years-old (so not that much older than the “boy”). This constructs the characterisation of an innocent character and an evil/corrupting character. Although at the age of 15 the “boy” in question could well have been described as a young person or ‘youth,’ this discourse emphasises vulnerability by using the *childhood* descriptor of “boy.” Furthermore, this article specifies ‘heroin and crack cocaine’ which, with these being the most ‘demonised’ drugs, emphasises the risk to the “boy” even more.

A further quote taken from *The Times*, also emphasises this theme regarding drugs as a threat to the innocent:

‘Four pupils were taken to hospital after a suspected drugs incident at Dunfermline High School, Fife, on Friday. Another six were treated at the school. All 10 were believed to have taken tablets at lunchtime.’
(*The Sunday Times* (London), Sunday 20th January 2019)

The emphasis here is on the danger to vulnerable/innocent children, with a focus on the fact that this incident took place at a school, specifically ‘at lunchtime.’ Arguably it sparks fear for parents, suggesting the risk to children regarding substance misuse, even under the eyes of the school. Relevant here is Kohn (1994) and the idea that specifically noted the focus on parents by the media, to fight what is often portrayed as an ‘epidemic.’

We can contrast these two articulations, which emphasise the innocence of the young people involved, with a third article that is very different in portrayal. The dangerous and immoral character of youth on drugs is emphasised in the language that was used in an article from *The Mirror*. The following quote particularly sparks an image of chaos, fear, and lack of control through use of a metaphor:

‘Teenagers off their heads on drugs. ... running riot in the Royal Victoria Hospital’
(*Daily Mirror*, Wednesday 23rd January 2019)

The language in this article continues to dramatize and emphasise danger, as immediately demonstrated by the articulation that the youngsters are not just consuming drugs, but they are ‘off their heads’ on them. A metaphor such as ‘running riot’ further and cleverly creates a chaotic image that represents the absence of control. Furthermore, the reference to this scene taking place within a hospital reinforces the idea that the teenagers have no morals, as they are creating havoc amongst the ill and vulnerable.

Meylaks (2009) draws on the work of Douglas (1992; 2002) when noting the particular significance of children in much media discourse about drugs. He argues that children tend to be symbols of purity, whereas drugs tend to be seen as ‘polluting’ substances and drug ‘dealers’ as polluters. The first article in this section can be seen as doing a lot of rhetorical work to *characterises* the county lines “boy” as a child, to accommodate him within the ‘pure’/‘corrupt’ dichotomy. The second article emphasizes risk to parents, as even when at school your children may not be as safe as you think. In the final article, we see how damningly children who

have been polluted by drugs are often portrayed. Interestingly in that article they are articulated with the descriptor of ‘teenagers,’ with all the historic connotations that this can entail.

Celebrity and Drugs

This theme refers to the articulation of drugs and users in relation to the phenomenon of celebrity. The theme of celebrity and drugs was identified in 10 articles and was mainly apparent in *The Sun* newspaper (a right-leaning tabloid) where it made $n = 8$ appearances. The remaining two occurrences of this theme were $n = 1$ in *The Times* (a right-leaning broadsheet) and *The Mirror* (a left-leaning tabloid). As in the themes addressed above, this theme is far more common in right-leaning newspapers.

Shaw et al. (2010) recognised that celebrity drug use depictions within the British media had raised concern regarding the impact that this may have on young people, in terms of triggering their usage. Our study demonstrates that the drug use of the famous, ranging from singers, footballers, to TV stars is evident in current newspaper articles. Media exaggeration in relation to celebrity drug use, was particularly recognised, in relation to the music artist, Robbie Williams:

‘Robbie Williams urged young fans to take illegal drugs during a live online chat’
(*The Sun* (England), Friday 25th January 2019)

This quote is taken from the beginning of an article, following the headline “Robbie tells fans: Drugs are great,” so would therefore appear to have been written with the intention to immediately shock the audience, grabbing their attention. The urging of ‘young fans’ is reinforced, again sparking particular fear through this focus on the young. It was later revealed that two fans had ‘jokingly asked him on Instagram what drugs they should be taking.’ Robbie had replied with a jokey response to the pair, before informing them that he had not taken drugs for a long time. This particular example therefore demonstrates media sensationalism in relation to this theme of celebrity and drugs. Furthermore, the article mentions Williams’ previous admittance to rehab, and suggests his drug experience to be regrettable. This could therefore suggest that celebrity and drug connections made in the media could possibly act as a deterrent to young users. Similarly, Power (1989) had previously recognised attempts of the media through using celebrity stories to try to discourage drug misuse, but argued against their success and the assumptions of passive audiences. Media panic or fearful representations can in fact excite young users encouraging use, as was demonstrated by Rietveld (1993) in relation to the media moral panic regarding Acid House in the late 1980s.

Drugs, Users and a Lack of Morality

This theme involved the articulation of drug users as lacking morality. For example, derogatory references are regularly made in relation to users, by presenting them alongside an act that suggests a lack of conscience which is related to their drug use. Another theme that has been identified is the connection often made between drug users and a lack of morality/conscience. This theme was found in six articles. It was more common in the tabloids than the broadsheets: *The Mirror* (a left-leaning tabloid) $n = 4$, *The Sun* (a right-leaning tabloid) $n = 1$ and *The Times* (a right-leaning broadsheet) $n = 1$. This trend is an exception to the tendency for more drug-related articles to be found in right-leaning newspapers.

This theme can be related to the argument of Ben-Yehuda (1994), with regard to how ‘moral boundaries’ are maintained by the media’s moral statements, that divide ‘the immoral’ user and ‘the moral’ non-user. Within our research sample, drug users were presented alongside various shameful acts. The following is taken from an article in *The Mirror*:

‘In another case, a cowboy builder admitted defrauding a widow of more than £6,400, spending the money on gambling, drink and drugs.’
(*Daily Mirror*, Thursday 24th January 2019)

In this example, the language specifies that the victim of the crime was a ‘widow,’ which plays on the sensibilities of the reader and emphasises the immoral character of the builder, perpetrator and victim very much articulated within discursive opposition.

Drug Users in Need of Support

A final and rare theme that was identified was the recognition of drug users in need of support. This theme involved the rare identifications of sympathy in the media discourse regarding drugs and users, demonstrating their need for support. This supportive language is a rare reversal of the dominant stigmatising media discourse. It was an uncommon theme, in comparison to those discussed above, occurring only three times out of a total sample of 76 articles. It does, however, demonstrate the possibility of sympathy in the newspaper industry, instead of blame and stigmatisation. This highlights a vital question regarding why this more positive view is so rarely found in newspapers. The newspapers in which this theme was identified, was once within *The Mirror* (a tabloid), and twice within *The Guardian* (a broadsheet), all left-leaning. In close connection with this theme, it was only five times that neutral, matter of fact, reporting regarding drugs and users (which we have not classified as specifically sympathetic reporting) was counted. This matter-of-fact reporting was identified once in *The Mirror*, three times in *The Sun* (surprising, given its tendency to sensationalise many issues) and once in *The Times*. This demonstrates occasions in which newspaper articles have been non-stigmatising or non-sensationalist in relation to drugs and users, and particularly raises the question with regards to why this cannot more often be the case. Coomber (1995) recognised that mixed messages in relation to drugs do exist in the media. Furthermore, the following is provided from an article in *The Guardian* and includes language that specifically relates to this theme:

‘“It shouldn’t be a blame culture,” he said. “If someone on the street has a substance misuse issue then they have an illness and they need more support rather than less support...”’
(*The Guardian* (London), Friday 25th January 2019).

This excerpt comes from an article in which it is recognised that homeless people with drug and alcohol problems may be barred from emergency accommodation, due to strict rules around alcohol and drugs and that people on the street with substance misuse problems urgently need more support and should not be blamed and stigmatised. The above quote is from the Chief Executive of a homeless charity based in Cardiff. It is very concerning that such views are so rarely expressed in news articles. The previous themes that our research has shown have been the cause of this blame culture, as phrased above, and this desperately needs to be challenged. Furthermore, the above language which emphasises the necessity for ‘more support rather than less support’ and which states that ‘there shouldn’t be a blame culture’ in fact also relates to previous literature, through illustrating that not all are receptive to stigmatising portrayals of users (Lloyd, 2013); there is existing recognition that those specifically suffering from substance misuse are an extremely vulnerable group and there is desperate need for support and to combat blame/stigmatisation.

Discussion: A Consistent Discourse and Two New Tools for Analysing It

The idea that newspaper coverage of drug use tends to be negative is not especially novel. Empirically confirming the degree of consistency within UK newspaper drug discourse is, however, significant and concerning. We found that articles about drugs are common across tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, both right and left-leaning and that, overall, the messages contained within them do not differ significantly in tone. The only significant difference is that right-leaning newspapers publish more such articles about drugs. Whilst rare, left-leaning newspapers are more likely to publish articles that are sympathetic in tone. However, these were balanced out by left-leaning newspapers also publishing more articles with the theme of drug users lacking morality/conscience.

The sample period was at a time of heightened public concern about knife crime and young people. Even so, the other themes explored are not neutral in tone either. This is important, as Hughes et al. (2011) argued that most portrayals in Australian newspapers tended to be neutral, but we found only five out of 76 to be as such. The themes identified in our analysis *are* the themes that when combined with drugs have tended to evoke heightened public concern: violence, young people/children, celebrity, social class and ethnicity and a lack of morality. This raises the question as to whether UK newspaper stories tend to have a consistently negative discourse in part *because* they tend to be about themes associated with public anxiety, thus are predominantly understood as negative. Coomber et al. (2000) noted that when they asked journalists about fact checking during writing drug-related stories, a number of them replied that they compared their current story to previously printed ones. This suggests one way in which a dominant discourse could have remained consistent over time; they follow the ‘script’ (Davies & Coggans, 1991).

One line of argument that we would like to develop at this point relates to two concepts that are emergent from our analysis, *occasioning* and *characterisation*. We believe that these two concepts can make a modest contribution to how drug-related narratives might be analysed.

Occasioning relates to what has occasioned the story to be written. As other authors have argued (Hughes et al., 2011; Manning, 2014), a large amount of drug-related news stories originate from courtroom reporting. Four of our six themes (violence and drugs; young people and drugs; drugs, users and morality; and drugs, social class and ethnicity) were occasioned by this. This represented 65 out of 76 articles. Due to the modest size sample that our research used, we cannot generalise this. However, it is the case that a large amount of UK press drug-related articles are occasioned by ‘courtroom’ reporting (Manning, 2014). This being so, a negative dominant discourse is hardly surprising.

Characterisation refers to the way that the characters in newspaper stories are articulated. Our starting point for this concept is Becker (2001) and his argument that for a substance to become labelled as a ‘drug,’ a process must occur which involves understandings of the substance, how is it consumed and who it is consumed by, which lead to an overall understanding, imposed primarily by the State, that this is either appropriate or inappropriate use (for more on the historical emergence of both, see Morris (2004)). Becker further argues that of the three aspects to this process, who the users are is the most important. We would suggest that it is actually who the users are *portrayed as being*, not who they necessarily are in reality. Let us reflect back on the themes discussed earlier, in terms of characterisation. Which characters have been articulated in those newspaper articles? Gangs and gang members were facelessly and namelessly conjured in the imagination of the reader, with stereotypes left to fill in the gaps. Children/young people were mentioned, playing on society’s anxieties whether they were victims or perpetrators; drug dealers, about whom little else we know; celebrities whose public personas we may know, but little else; the grandson of the Sixth Earl of Cawdor and a trafficked Vietnamese man, both stereotyped in terms of social class and its intersections with ethnicity; a “cowboy builder”; and a sensitive discussion of homeless people who may use drugs, but which is actually articulated by the Chief Executive of a relevant charity, not a journalist. All of these characters are archetypes. The actual

individuals are people about whom we are told very little and the attendant language strongly shapes the way that they might be interpreted.

Conclusion

Overall, whilst taking into account the modest size of our sample, our paper confirms that tabloid or broadsheet, left or right-leaning, little significant difference exists in the content and tone of how drug-related narratives are constructed in the UK press. Right-leaning newspapers publish more stories about drugs, but left-leaning newspapers can be just as negative in tone, overall. In relation to Hughes et al. (2011), at least in our sample, the majority of stories *are* those that relate to themes that invoke periods of heightened public concern. This may be part of an explanation as to why much of the rest of the world is liberalising its laws around drugs, but the UK is not. The stories that we as a society tell ourselves, such as those in the press, produce and reproduce our (mis)understandings of an issue. Existing research has demonstrated the significant influence that the media has over policy (Hughes et al., 2011; Silverman, 2011; UKDPC, 2012; Tieberghien, 2014; Gstrein, 2018). Our findings confirm Coomber's (1995) claim that whilst possible variation according to the form of media may exist, the *overall* message may be the same. As this claim was made over 25 years ago, it appears that UK national newspapers are still a "policy 'satnav,' which ministers have followed almost slavishly (Silverman, 2011). Perhaps this is part of an explanation as to why the UK continues to resist the movement towards liberalisation seen in an increasing amount of the rest of the world. When a dominant discourse is reproduced, across the spectrum of the best-selling newspapers, it is reasonable to assume that the prospect of change in drug-related policy may be impeded by that to a considerable degree. It is difficult to assess to what extent, of course, but it is arguably a significant part of opinion formation.

We have also briefly outlined two concepts that may be of use to others in their analysis of newspaper representations of drug-related stories: *occasioning* and *characterisation*. The concept of *occasioning* relates to what occasioned the story and details relevant to that. For example, if a court case has occasioned the article, as it often is, then the dominant negative discourse will likely apply. The concept of *characterisation* relates to the human characters within the narrative and how they are articulated, paying attention to the attendant language that attempts to frame how the characters and their actions will be interpreted by the readers.

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