

The 'War' on Drugs

Media Pay Lopsided Attention to Cutting Supply, Too Little to Reducing Demand

BY LLOYD D. JOHNSTON

Since Richard Nixon first declared war on drugs in the early seventies, drug abuse in the United States has provided a rich bone for the media. That richness has derived in part from the multi-faceted nature of the drug abuse issue: political, moral, legal, sociological, psychological, philosophical, medical, and so on. Five presidents later, the nation continues its struggle with the issue, and the media continues to cover it, though somewhat more episodically in recent years.

Clearly an unusual thing occurred in the country over the last 25 years in that a significant proportion of the population came to use a wide variety of drugs, which had long been illegal and which in the mainstream of the population were considered immoral. This was an unparalleled epidemic in comparison

to virtually all other industrialized countries, and in comparison to previous drug epidemics in this country. It has been a phenomenon of great importance to government, and in many years has been cited by the citizenry as the most important domestic issue facing the nation. It also has been an extremely controversial national issue, dividing not only those of different ideologies but also those of different generations. It is little wonder, then, that the media has paid so much attention to the subject over the last quarter of a century.

Perhaps it is useful to note the underlying changes in the phenomenon of illicit drug use over the years before considering the role of the media in it. Of course, some illicit drug use is endemic. Heroin had been used by fringe groups in the population for decades before the great expansion of the drug epidemic into mainstream America in the late sixties, but most of the drugs to enter the scene—marijuana, LSD, amphetamines, and cocaine—were practically unknown to the generation of the silent fifties and early sixties. Then two things of great consequence happened during the sixties. First, a philosophy of inner-directedness began to catch on, and young people adopted drugs as useful vehicles to explore the inner self. Second, the Vietnam war expanded rapidly, and along with other historical events of the time like Watergate, gave rise to a great deal of youth alienation, which in turn gave rise to the counterculture movement. This youth alienation was a powerful catalyst to the drug epidemic. The movement adopted the use of marijuana, LSD and eventu-

ally other drugs in part for symbolic reasons, both as an act of defiance of the predominant societal norms and as a symbolic ritual of solidarity (most obviously embodied in the passing of the joint). Our own research and that of others has shown that the use of LSD and marijuana, in particular, was correlated with the other behaviors and attitudes comprising the counterculture orientation, including opposition to the war.

As the Vietnam era passed and the counterculture movement faded into history, the drug epidemic continued relatively unabated, as if out of sheer forward momentum. Today it primarily reflects hedonistic, not symbolic behavior. It also reflects a propensity to engage in deviant behavior, as it always has to some degree.

By the end of the seventies and into the eighties, major elements of the epidemic began to lose momentum. Among youth, marijuana use began to decline in 1979, amphetamine use in 1982, cocaine use in 1987.

The role that the media have played in the unfolding of this national drama is almost as complex as the problem of drug abuse itself. Recall that, for the most part, the silent-fifties generation was unfamiliar with many of these drugs and unaware of their psychoactive potential. When the epidemic began to gather steam in the late sixties, the media played an important role disseminating information to the public about these drugs and their alleged benefits. Timothy Leary and other proponents of drug use received maximum air time and the naiveté of a generation of young Americans was forever lost. In

Lloyd D. Johnston has testified on substance abuse many times before Congressional committees, written more than 100 papers on the subject and has been a consultant for the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the White House. The 53-year-old research scientist holds an MBA in organizational behavior from Harvard and a Ph. D. in social psychology from the University of Michigan. He is currently chair of the Steering Committee of the Substance Abuse Center of Excellence at the University of Michigan.

the intervening years other drugs have come along (e.g. crack, ice, ecstasy, PCP) and were similarly "advertised" to the population through rapid and extensive media coverage.

Because early coverage of the epidemic was so sensational and selective, I think the media inadvertently gave the impression that "everyone was doing it" among American young people, and thus helped to shift the perceived norms in the late sixties. For example, if a high school somewhere in the country conducted a drug survey and found 60 percent of its student body smoked pot, the story reached every paper in the country, but a school survey showing little or no use received virtually no coverage. In 1969, when my colleagues and I completed the first national survey of drug use among males in the senior class, we found that only 25 percent indicated any experience with marijuana or any other illicit drug. (Males, incidentally, have higher rates than females.) Drug use among American young people was clearly exaggerated in the early years.

During the mid- to late seventies, one got the impression from much media coverage that the drug problem was improving, perhaps because use was not as public and florid as it had been in the Vietnam years. According to survey data, however, use actually continued to climb steadily until 1979, when two-thirds of each graduating high school class admitted some experience with illicit drugs. (An interesting aside is that fully 80 percent of these graduating classes admitted illicit use by the time they reached their late twenties, including 40 percent who had tried cocaine. If past drug experience were to be used to disqualify people from high office, as some have suggested, there would be very few in this generation still eligible to serve.)

During the first half of the eighties cocaine prevalence among young Americans was fairly level, but the casualty indicators (use of drug hotlines, overdose emergencies, overdose deaths, demand for treatment) kept rising. This divergence came about because there is a natural lag of four to seven years between the initiation of cocaine use

and when people usually start to get into trouble with the drug. The survey data did not tell an alarming story, but the casualty statistics did. Reporters, of course, went for the latter, leaving the country with the mistaken impression that cocaine use was climbing rapidly in the early eighties when, in fact, prevalence rates were fairly flat.

Admittedly the underlying phenomenon was a complex one, and the long lag time between initiation and trouble fooled many academics, as well. As late as 1981, "experts" saying that cocaine was a clean drug were quoted in the national media: you could not die from an overdose; you could not become addicted to it.

The media's special attraction to the alarming announcements sometimes benefits society, of course. A new problem quickly gets both public and government attention. The media helps to set the agenda, and, of course, sometimes what is happening in reality really is alarming. When our research team reported in 1975 that 6 percent of high school seniors were daily marijuana smokers, both media coverage and public reaction were strong. When that prevalence rate nearly doubled in the following three years a sense of alarm set in. These reactions helped give rise to a number of activities which contributed to a rapid reversal of this trend: research on the effects of marijuana was rapidly expanded, television specials and special news segments about marijuana and its effects were initiated, and a grassroots parent movement began to grow.

Many times over the years the media spotlight has shifted across drugs. At different times, the preponderance of coverage has been on marijuana, LSD, speed or methamphetamine, cocaine, and crack. The spotlight shifts, of course, toward the emergence of new problems and away from the continuation or diminution of old ones.

Another vital role the media has played in relation to drugs has been in helping shape the nation's choice of a broad strategy for dealing with them. Perhaps Richard Nixon cast the die in using the metaphor of a war, which carries the connotations of winning or

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losing; of easily discernible enemies and friends; of the appropriateness of a military or police response. The media were attracted to the drama implied by the metaphor and for decades have kept that conceptualization alive.

For a number of years, most experts in the drug field and many law enforcement people, including many police chiefs and FBI directors, have realized that the drug "war" could not be won on the battlefield of supply control; that was just a holding action. The real solution lays with reducing the demand for drugs. However, media emphasis on the two classes of activity—demand reduction and supply reduction—has been uneven and lopsided. War games, sinister cartel leaders, moguls like Manuel Noriega, cops and criminals on the streets of our cities—the exciting stuff dramatic stories are made of. Never mind that the real solution resides in the more mundane activities of education in the schools; education in the family; counseling of early users and treatment of advanced users; cooperation among parents; constructive use of the media, and in the social organization and mobilization of communities. I doubt that 2 percent of the total media coverage of America's struggle with drugs over the last 25 years dealt with these issues, even though a consensus emerged years ago among those in the know (both inside and outside of government) that it is in these domains that the true solutions lie. (Many electronic and print reporters and editors have known it, too.)

Television has played a particular role here with its desperate and endless

search for graphic drama in the news. How many times have you seen a raid on a crack house in some American city—any city? The plot is totally predictable, almost numbing: the battering ram, the noisy rush of police, the

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when contenders for Congressional seats were challenging each other to urinalysis in what became known as "jar wars." Following the intense coverage of these events, the dangers attributed to these drugs by young Americans soared, and their use plunged.

Social norms for use also shifted concurrently, probably as the result of the changes in perceived risk. Throughout the eighties marijuana use became less acceptable; cocaine use became less acceptable in the last half of the eighties. I believe the media, particularly through their news programs and news specials, contributed significantly to these constructive outcomes. Many of the changes in young people's attitudes and beliefs about drugs are really quite dramatic.

Recognizing the power of the media in general, and of advertising in particular, the media and national advertising agencies began working together in the late eighties to play an intentional and constructive role to reduce drug use. Through the Partnership for a Drug Free America they have collaborated to produce and deliver a sophisticated advertising campaign against drugs. Our research shows that young people are very aware of these ads, find them credible and report that they have made them less likely to use drugs.

Until 1992, it seemed that drug use was going in the right direction, thanks in part to these media efforts. However, in 1992, we saw the first evidence of a turnaround in use among eighth graders, that is, in the newest group entering adolescence. This change serves as a reminder of two things: first, our struggle with drugs is never over and second, each new generation of youngsters has to learn what earlier ones learned about drugs, or else they will get to learn the hard way, by experience. The media will continue to play an important role in this unending drama, whether by intention or not. I hope that in the future it is a role which is more self-aware and perhaps less self-indulgent. The stakes are too high for our media to opt for entertainment over good, insightful reporting in the news. ■

The media has played a major role in bringing about this seriously flawed and distorted policy response through their increasingly desperate search for entertainment, rather than what is right or even accurate. A harsh assessment, but one which I firmly believe. When our news organizations become shallow, so eventually do our people, our politicians and our policies.

recovered drugs, the bundles of money, the weapons seized and the handcuffed suspects. Great entertainment, lousy policy. Those dealers are replaced by others before the videotape can be transmitted.

The print media have done their share, too. In the heyday of use, some national news magazines averaged at least two cover stories a year, and many feature articles about drugs. Those few articles, concluding that the supply reduction effort is probably futile, nevertheless spent nearly all their column inches reporting it. Acceptance of an outside editorial piece suggesting that our policy was on the wrong road was nearly impossible.

The approach of news as entertainment has, in my opinion, helped to distort the national response to a very serious problem. Even politicians who know that demand reduction was a better solution are deathly afraid of being called "soft" on drugs. The end result is that they keep favoring the cops-and-robbers supply reduction efforts predominantly featured in America's media. Recall that 70 percent of federal resources go for supply reduction, and only 30 percent for demand reduction, primarily treatment. That is the way it was under Reagan and Bush, that is the way it still is under Clinton. The media has played a major

lieve. When our news organizations become shallow, so eventually do our people, our politicians and our policies.

While the media may have given inadvertent emphasis to the supply-side strategy, let me add that they also have played, often unwittingly, an important and constructive role in the demand reduction effort. Those of us who do research on drug use have demonstrated that use goes down when the perceived dangers of a drug go up. In the early days of the epidemic, the dangers of many illegal drugs were unknown. As experience cumulated, many of the adverse consequences began to emerge, and the media heavily covered them. A great deal of media attention (as epitomized in the 1979 NBC one-hour television special, "Reading, Writing, and Reefer") was paid to the possible dangers of marijuana in the late seventies, and use fell substantially as young people began to understand that marijuana use, particularly heavy use, can be dangerous to the user. Similarly, as the potential dangers of overdose and addiction became clear for cocaine and crack in the mid-eighties, use declined. Peak media coverage of cocaine's effects occurred in 1986, when professional athletes Len Bias and Don Rogers died as a result of cocaine use, and