

The Failure of News Media Agenda-Setting on Cannabis

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

This study uses the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176) to examine the various aspects of cannabis coverage in the news media and how news media have presented cannabis and the numerous debates over cannabis uses. Cannabis has been a focus of U.S. news media since the 19th century and has been historically misrepresented in national and local news media.

More recently, the U.S. has seen a great shift in the public's attitude towards cannabis. With more and more states legalizing medical and even recreational use, news media are surging to meet the demands of its publics, even creating entire sections in certain regional newspapers for the cannabis beat. The national news media must take a different approach than those regional papers though; marijuana is not legal at the federal level nor in many states in any form. Both national and regional newspapers must address the issues accompanying the road to legalization at the federal level since federal law may supersede state law in any case as the legislation currently stands.

Background of the Problem

The existing literature on this subject is lacking. There are only a handful of studies pertaining to how this particular issue has been framed in news media and only a handful more on the issue in news media at all. Of the studies pertaining to this subject matter, many contain data on illicit drugs of every sort; few are focused solely on cannabis.

Much of the discrepancies in reporting can also be attributed to the lack of research and therefore lack of authoritative sources for news media to draw from. As it currently stands, cannabis is a Schedule I substance according to the DEA and therefore is recognized to have no medical merit, meaning it is extremely difficult to perform legal research studies on the potential benefits the drug or its parts as a medicine or recreational intoxicant.

Purpose of the Study

In the 1920s it became apparent that the news media was having a massive effect on the public's perception of cannabis. As America entered the 1930s, Henry J. Anslinger, the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, utilized radio, newspapers and cinema as means of propaganda to further effect change.

News media played a large role in the criminalization of marijuana and is continuing to play a large role today as states assert their rights and pass their own laws regarding the substance.

This study will explore the past and present representations in news media, examine use of framing techniques and delve into the reasoning behind the current and past methods of portrayal.

Setting for the Study

This study will be conducted as a part of a Senior Project at California Polytechnic State University located in San Luis Obispo, California.

Research Questions

1. How can the agenda setting theory be applied to news media's portrayal of cannabis?
2. What are the current strategies utilized in cannabis coverage?
3. What motivations have been exhibited in news media in the past regarding cannabis coverage?

Organization of Study

Chapter 1 presents the statement and background of the problem, a purpose and setting for the study, a set of research questions and a definition of terms. Chapter 2 will delve into the available literature on the subject and identify what areas have available research as well as the limitations on this study due to lack of available research. The methodology of this study will be explained in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 analyzes the available data and presents the interviews. The discussion and recommendations as well as the conclusion are detailed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The review of literature begins with a brief history on the subject matter and proceeds to focus on the existing literature on cannabis in American news media including framing practices, a lack of authoritative experts to utilize as sources and the problems associated with an abundance of anecdotal evidence when combined with a lack of proper research. Limits are placed on this study due to the small volume of studies done by experts on this issue. The scope of this review of literature had to be broadened due to a lack of specialized, credible studies.

A Brief History on Marijuana Pertaining to the U.S.

The genus cannabis was discovered to contain more than one species in 1753 thanks to the work of a Swedish botanist (Warf, 2014, p. 416). Those distinctions were *Cannabis sativa*, which contains psychoactive properties, and *Cannabis sativa L*, which does not and is the genus referred to as hemp. In the next 200 years two more would also be discovered, *Cannabis indica* and *Cannabis ruderalis*, both of which, like *Cannabis sativa*, can produce hallucinogenic effects under certain conditions.

While cannabis has a relatively recent history pertaining to its study, it has been cultivated used by human beings for millennia. “The earliest use of cannabis as medicine is attributed to...Chinese Emperor Shen Nung, who is thought to have lived around 2700 B.C.” (Pain, 2015, p. S10). There is evidence of hemp being present as far back as 12,000 years ago, placing it among the most ancient cultivated crops (Warf, 2014, p. 419). Nomadic herding tribes brought the plant west

William Brooke O'Shaughnessy, an Irish physician, concluded in 1842 after a series of experiments that it had no negative medicinal effects (p. 426). The tide soon turned though, with Britain concluding that cannabis caused insanity and that it was to blame, in part, for the Sepoy Rebellion in India (p. 427).

Regulations were soon put in place there and in their other colonies, the first of many that would later be determined to have been based not on evidence but on socioeconomic class and race (Rubin & Comitas, 1975, p. 131). When the League of Nations in 1919 sought to limit the use of cultivation of opium and coca, cannabis was also included.

Although the U.S. was not a member of the League of Nations, it began to make moves against cannabis around that time. Cannabis gained its new moniker of marijuana in an attempt to separate its history from its future. Marijuana, a Spanish word, was used instead to connect the prejudices against Mexican immigrants with the plant.

Starting in the 1920s, William Randolph Hearst began to exert his influence to support the anti-cannabis rhetoric (Speaker, 2001, p. 594). In his papers such as the San Francisco Examiner and New York Journal, Los Angeles Examiner and more, as well as in pieces in other prominent newspapers not owned by Hearst such as *The New York Times*, marijuana was blamed for a "crime wave" (p. 600), further associating the drug with delinquency.

The nail in the coffin came from Henry J. Anslinger, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics chief, during the 1930s (p. 592). Anslinger and his contemporaries took to radio, gave interviews to newspapers and created films such as "Reefer Madness" (1936) and "Marijuana: Assassin of Youth" (1937) to further their agenda. In 1937 the Marijuana Tax Act was passed, effectively outlawing cannabis (Warf, p. 430).

The passage of the Boggs Act in 1951 led to mandatory sentences for those found to be in possession of cannabis and made the penalties the same as for possessing heroin. The New York Times in 1951, following the approval of the House for the bill, published an article speculating on the possible consequences of these mandatory minimums (NYT July 16, 1951). In 1956 Congress more than doubled many of those penalties with the Daniel Act of 1956, even proposing a death penalty for certain offenses which was ultimately left out (NYT May 31, 1956).

Marijuana use exploded in the 1960s in the U.S. despite the possibility of harsh penalties. Use spread across cultures and socioeconomic boundaries and led to a brief period in the 1970s where a change in policy seemed to be on the very near horizon (p. 431).

Even with all that promise, in 1970 the Controlled Substances Act (CSA) listed cannabis in all its forms as a Schedule I controlled substance. “Schedule I substances are those with the highest abuse potential and no medical use” (Kolosov, 2009, p. 246). It is still classified in this manner today. Richard Nixon in 1972 rejected the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse’s finding that the drug should be decriminalized (Warf, p. 431), although eleven states decriminalized small amounts of the drug and legalization was supported by several prominent organizations.

Prior to 1970s the majority of marijuana was imported. In the 1970s the U.S. began spraying the herbicide paraquat over Mexican fields containing marijuana plants. SNL’s Chevy Chase during Weekend Update offered “testing” of weed to determine if it was contaminated, telling viewers to send in small amounts of weed. Newspapers such as the New York Times published editorials in the 1980s when the U.S. planned to spray federal lands in 40 states, with

the spokesman for the White House Drug Abuse Policy Office saying that the spray is no hazard to anyone and “turns plants to dust” within 72 hours, a statement that was not entirely true.

Ronald Reagan’s “zero tolerance” legislation inspired further actions against marijuana in the years following, including workplace drug tests, state “smoke a joint, lose your license” statutes and more (p. 432). Even with the push against marijuana, California passed the Compassionate Use Act in 1996, with multiple states following suit.

Marijuana remains illegal at the federal level in the U.S. but many states allow medical use now, and more recently several states have legalized recreational use. As more states and citizens approve its use for themselves and those around them, stories of its possible applications and implications abound.

The Framing is Flawed

The framing theory is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele, D. A. & Tewksbury, D., 2007, p. 11). Because cannabis enjoys such a volatile past, how a news media medium frames it can have a huge effect on the perception of a story and the issue itself. The collective conclusion from existing literature is that cannabis is most often framed as a legal or political issue, even in discussions of medical merit. This is not unexpected, due to its current federal classification as an illegal substance.

Craig (1981) alleged that the news media reflected the public’s confusion in regards to cannabis due to changing societal norms and political tumult (p. 1091). Craig’s assertion did not discern a difference between medical marijuana and recreational marijuana; medical marijuana was not legalized in any state until 1996 with the passage of the Compassionate Use Act in

California. His assertion regarding the confusion surrounding cannabis was based on the wide array of subject matter in the stories he sampled. While marijuana was perceived as being far less dangerous than heroin, it received more attention in newspapers.

A study conducted in 2010 on the framing of the medical marijuana debate in editorial and op-ed columns found a variety of subject matter as well, although it concluded that the editorial and op-ed were used for different purposes in the debate (Golan, 2010, p. 58). A concern cited by Golan was the apparent lack of issue diversity as well as source diversity.

Lack of Experts

Much of the reasoning behind this lack of authoritative sources is that there are severe limitations on who can study cannabis and therefore who can gain expertise in the field. Because it is a Schedule I substance according to the DEA, it is recognized as having no medical merit. This classification leads to extreme difficulty in obtaining plants for research, leading to a lack of credible experts. Most advanced researchers would be wary to conduct any research that could easily result in legal ramifications. While undergraduate and graduate researchers may not balk at the idea, their superiors would do well to avoid even supervising projects or studies dealing with marijuana.

The sources that are available for reference in news media in the U.S. are then rarely experts in the same sense as leading members of other fields where research is not impeded by issues of legality. Golan referred to a tendency to ignore scientific experts in favor of administrative officials, overlooking the great lack of expertise.

It should be noted that this is an issue for U.S. research. Israel is recognized as the primary source of information for Americans (Newsweek Dec. 17, 2015). Canada and the

Netherlands, among others, have also published many advanced research projects on medical marijuana. U.S. news media does often call upon these sources but when discussing policy these studies can be viewed as inadequate for effecting change.

A 1981 study on sources in news media found that the most frequently cited authorities on the issue of marijuana were administrative officials of government institutions or of private medical establishments (Shepherd, 1981, p. 135). There were also news articles which used the results of marijuana research publications, but these numbered far fewer than those which cited administrative officials. “69 percent of those represented by the press as science authorities on marijuana had no citations on marijuana published in science journals....the great majority had, in fact, never done any research on marijuana at all” (p. 134).

News media are not the only area lacking in experience and expertise pertaining to cannabis; as marijuana continues to grow as an issue of policy, the need for qualified people grows. The New York Times published an article in May, 2017 on the troubling circumstances of its panel formed to grant licenses for dispensing recently legalized medical marijuana in New York (McKinley, 2017).

Anecdote vs. Data

This lack of credible, quantifiable research has led to a large amount of anecdotal evidence being presented in a fact-passing manner.

In one New York Times article published in February, “When Retirement Comes With a Daily Dose of Cannabis”, three separate anecdotal accounts detailing the wonders of marijuana are given amidst quotes from college professors and policy advocates. “Pregnant Women Turn to Marijuana, Perhaps Harming Infants”, also published by the New York Times in February,

weaves anecdotal accounts with preliminary and admittedly contradictory research. 18 days later they published a follow-up, “A Balm When You’re Expecting: Sometimes Pot Does the Trick”, a compilation of anecdotes from women who used marijuana during pregnancy.

This is an emerging trend in news media unfortunately, one that is increasing as marijuana use becomes socially acceptable. Anecdotal evidence can be found in nearly every news publication, print and otherwise, that contains stories on cannabis. While some anecdotes may be proven true when research and science catch up, some will be proven false. The issue facing readers today is not that of discerning truth from lie but rather anecdotal from factual evidence.

The unfortunate truth of the matter is that there simply isn’t data out there to be found. The absence of data does not mean anecdotes may be used in place of data, only that there is nothing conclusive at this time due to a variety of reasons, including a lack of research. Without the proper research, people cannot be sure that cannabis is indeed doing people more harm than good. Anecdotes are not controlled studies; other factors, even the placebo effect, may account for the dramatic changes that many people attribute to the effects of cannabis on their ailments.

Grinspoon and Bakalar (1998) compared cannabis at the time to lithium in the 1950s (p. 176). Lithium was in a similar legal position but some in academia found it may be helpful for those who suffered from bipolar disorder. Part of the delay in legality for lithium is compared to cannabis largely because both are substances which cannot necessarily be patented. Patents and trade secrets are partially what drive the pharmaceutical companies’ profits. Lithium, like cannabis, had had its negative effects observed in the past as well, causing death in some cardiac patients. Grinspoon and Bakalar go on to berate the classification of cannabis as a Schedule I drug and to blame that classification for this buildup of anecdotal evidence that lacks proper data

to back it up (p. 177). Throughout their paper they quote anecdotes of people with bipolar disorder who claim cannabis alone or cannabis with traditional treatments has curbed their disorder better than anything else. Their lament is, of course, that further research cannot be done in the present climate.

It has been found in academia that anecdotal evidence is not believed to be as strong as statistical evidence (Hoeken, 2001, p. 434). Inhibiting research then also contributes to the widespread belief that cannabis is dangerous and does not possess many or any of the medical attributes so many anecdotes say it does.

Chapter 3

Methodology

While most of the literature on this subject thus far has been quantitative, this study takes a qualitative approach, looking at news media which has garnered public attention lately and why those pieces are or aren't problematic.

Data Sources

Academic studies and older news media examples were found using databases available from Cal Poly's Kennedy Library including Google Scholar, Academic Search Premier, LexisNexis Academic, ProQuest Newsstand, ProQuest Historical Newspapers and California Digital Newspaper Collection.

News media examples were found by perusing national news websites themselves and other boards, such as Reddit, where popular articles may be posted or discussed.

Data Collection

Academic studies were evaluated based on their relevance, method of publication, qualifications of authors and timeliness.

News media examples were evaluated based on their prevalence in culture and their reach.

Interview Design

The interview questions were designed based off available academic studies and a preliminary interview with David Downs, the current editor of the cannabis section of the San

San Francisco Chronicle. Because of details which Mr. Downs provided, the questions could be specifically tailored towards news professionals in an editorial position.

Interviews were conducted over the phone. These interviews were designed for the purpose of obtaining background on cannabis in news media so this study could better evaluate current trends. For Mr. Downs, excerpts were also taken from his interview with the New York Times (Mcphate, 2017).

Interview Questions

1. What was your introduction into cannabis news media?
2. What sparked your personal and professional interests in cannabis?
3. How have you seen news coverage on cannabis change?

Interview Participants

David Downs, the Cannabis Editor for the San Francisco Chronicle and SFGATE was selected based on his recognized expertise in this emerging field.

Alex Pasquariello, the editor of The Cannabist, of The Denver Post, was selected for his differing perspective as a new player on the field.

Limitations

This study presents limitations based on the timeframe during which it was completed. This study was conducted as part of a quarter-long Senior Project. As a result, the study was designed with a 10-week period in mind, so the data collected may not be as extensive as it would have been if the study was conducted over a longer amount of time.

There are limitations on the type of data collected in the interview processes. It was not possible in the length of time to connect with more news media professionals. The interviews also had to be conducted over the phone due to the location of the respondents. This study is focused on news media and therefore public relations, marketing or advertising professionals would not suffice.

There were also limitations placed on this study due to it being conducted in San Luis Obispo, a place where marijuana in 2017 is only legally available with a medical card from delivery only dispensaries.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

What the Experts Have to Say

Both David Downs and Alex Pasquariello emphasized that their approach to cannabis coverage is journalism with a capital “J”.

What was your introduction into the cannabis news scene?

David Downs in 2009 was integral in the launch of LegalizationNation, an east bay express news blog on cannabis. Before then he had written stories on cannabis. He saw a demand for coverage that was adult and mature, something that was rare in mainstream news. Some of the cannabis-specific media out there was not newsy or professional.

Alex Pasquariello has been a voracious consumer of news for most of his life. Being from Denver, he consumed a lot of news from his hometown. He began to see development of the cannabis beat by The Denver Post and the Boulder Daily Camera as well as an alternative newspaper called Westword.

What sparked your personal and professional interest in cannabis?

David Downs became interested in the subject at the end of high school. He discovered that if you were convicted of a crime concerning cannabis you would lose your financial aid. He grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, witnessing the drug war and mass incarceration. His high school also took field trips to jail.

Alex Pasquariello was drawn to cannabis professionally because he believes it is the most interesting journalism beat that is out there right now. “The topics that fall under the umbrella of

cannabis are just incredibly diverse. Everything from spirituality to medicine, life-saving medicine.” The Denver Post had published coverage on the American Legion’s letter to Trump regarding cannabis and a recipe for a cannabis-infused poke the day of the interview.

How have you seen the news media change its coverage of the cannabis issue in the last few years?

David Downs has seen cannabis coverage become more sophisticated, with senior rather than only junior reporters covering cannabis topics that range from policy to medical studies to lifestyle pieces. Dr. Sanjay Gupta’s Weed series for CNN is an example of the emergence of coverage that is executed well. Many city and regional newspapers are still lacking in many ways however, using puns and regarding the cannabis beat as unneeded. National coverage is also still a mixed bag, some news media are still reporting reefer madness type stories, making crazy allegations and publishing not scientifically valid stories or studies. In May, a story about a man killing his wife alleged that his claim of the edible making him do it was true.

“There’s a very serious demand for basic orientation information. Cannabis is like its own planet and people want to visit but they don’t know how to get around or what the etiquette is, let alone what these products are and what they do. And so we’re going to be building that bridge for them.”

Alex Pasquariello has seen great change in the last four to five years in news media as cannabis is becoming covered more in depth. “We talk to our congressional leadership, for instance, we hear them say that it’s actually being taken seriously. When the topic again comes up in legislation, it is not just booted and made fun of with stoner jokes, etc. but actually being

taken seriously on a level from medical marijuana to social justice and trying to reform the criminal justice system.”

How do you, as a journalist, view the battle for legalization in both the medical and recreational sectors?

Alex Pasquariello: “From our reporting standpoint, it’s to cover the policy, I think one reason you see it framed that way, to be honest if I can interject there, is because there hasn’t been the scientific research that they can put into that type of, that they can put into their arguments. All the medical side [in the U.S.] is all anecdotal.”

How do you determine a source’s credibility?

Alex Pasquariello: “The scheduling of cannabis as a schedule I substance, by definition in the federal government, it says that they have high potential for abuse. There is currently no accepted medical use and that right there, that classification, as a baseline, eliminates large scale research that would, to journalists, provide the ability to talk to researchers and scientists and universities about their studies, about their findings.

“Peer-reviewed journals, none of that exists at least in the American system right now. There’s a ton of great research coming out of Israel for instance, university studies, stuff from Dr. Mechoulam.

“The American system doesn’t have that body of academic or medical research available to journalists. So what you find then is anecdotes, advocates and then policy. Until that Schedule I designation is rescinded or modified, it’s very hard to find the same traditional journalistic sources of doctors, researchers, peer-reviewed journal material that you could find on virtually

any other medical topic. So then what do we do? Well we continue to report out for those who are fighting to have that research done. Where research is available we examine it and decide if it's appropriate."

In the News

An article published in *The Cannafornian* in April (Krieger, 2017) reflects a lack of authoritative sources. While one expert referenced in their article has multiple publications regarding the use of marijuana in adolescents, the other only has one published work pertaining to cannabis and that one work has only been cited once by other publications despite being released in 2016.

The *Denver Post's* *The Cannabist* in May reposted an article by *The Associated Press* on a drug trial where CBD oil was given to children with Dravet syndrome, a form of epilepsy (Marchione, 2017). Both of the experts quoted had multiple studies in the area and one even referred to anecdotal evidence in his commentary on the new study.

Though there are examples of news media containing authoritative sources, there is little context given to determine who is or isn't an expert in that particular field. There is also generally a lack of explanation as to how the study was conducted and how significant its findings were. The *Washington Post* published an article June 9 (Ingraham, 2017) on a recent study conducted on the effects of THC on reactions to stressful situations. The researchers' qualifications are not even briefly mentioned by *The Washington Post*.

The University of Illinois at Chicago recently published that study in 2017; it was authored by three researchers who each hold a Ph.D. (Childs, Lutz, de Wit, 2017). The study examined the effects of different doses of THC on stress levels in a sample of 42. Their purpose was to assess if this main ingredient of cannabis does reduce stress as many anecdotes report. They concluded in their low dose sample it reduced stress but in their high dose sample it can increase stress. In their study they explained that CBD has been found in the past to have that anxiolytic aspect that they were searching for in THC, but this was not brought to the reader's attention in the abstract or even in the first several pages. Yet they began their abstract by stating that this study sought to examine reports from cannabis smokers, despite giving their research subject pills of only THC, which is only one of the many compounds found in cannabis. They also failed to discern a difference in the method of absorption, although they did measure levels two and half hours post-intake which they equated to thirty minutes post-smoking.

On the subject of sources, that study had only one author who had done significant cannabis research prior to this study. A search on Google Scholar searched to find any articles containing any of the keywords "cannabis", "marijuana" or "THC" turned up no additional articles for the principal author of the study. The author who had done significant prior research on the subject was listed third, while the second listed author also showed a lack of prior research. An article posted on the University of Illinois at Chicago's website about the research garnered a front page slot on Reddit only a day after publication and quoted Childs extensively, despite this being her first study concerning cannabis.

Research Question 1: How can the agenda setting theory be applied to news media's portrayal of cannabis?

The news appears to have not set the agenda on the cannabis issue. While fringe magazines and news media have reported on cannabis, more traditional mediums have not in a meaningful way. That is changing now and as it changes, media are again pushing the agenda. But is it enough? When issues like this come up, the news normally pays an immense amount of attention to it. In the case of marijuana, there has been a lack of attention given, in part due to the lack of credible sources in this area of research. Unfortunately, attention has not been given to the reasons behind this lack, and much of the public therefore cannot be aware of the limitations that exist.

Research Question 2: What are the current strategies utilized in cannabis coverage?

It's growing and certain news media are also growing to meet the demand for mature and professional coverage. Other news media are not, and even those that are still have problems. Even in Sanjay Gupta's famed Weed documentaries for CNN, there is an abundance of puns. Right now the biggest problems are with framing and the selection vetting of sources. From the research available it is apparent that there are a lack of American academia sources to choose from but news media may go outside America for sources. Of the existing sources that have been used, there appears to be a lack of vetting in certain cases. Some are being referred to or alluded to as an expert even if they have only a handful or just one study published on the issue. On the topic of framing, there has

been a tendency to frame in a policy manner above all else. The reasons for this have been addressed throughout.

Research Question 3: What motivations have been exhibited in news media in the past and what motivations currently are exhibited regarding cannabis coverage?

As always, much of news media must be motivated by money. This is why the two cannabis editors interviewed here were from San Francisco and Denver. Cannabis coverage is acceptable and wanted in those areas and therefore a section is warranted: it will make money. In the past coverage, especially positive coverage, of marijuana could lead to people ending their subscriptions or boycotting the organization. Negative coverage would sell though; this is why Anslinger's crusade was so successful. People wanted to hear about it. It was tantalizing.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Conclusion, Recommendation

While cannabis is showing up increasingly in news publications across the country, it is not always showing up in a way that does the issues surrounding its controversies justice. Marijuana still needs to be reported on more, but frequency is not the only issue at hand. The way in which each and every article is framed is also key, and when the framing must stay the same, the reasoning for that framing must be properly explained. News media has not done an adequate job of presenting cannabis as anything other than a policy issue. The problem then exists that when it is presented as a policy issue, the news media does not properly explain why it is a policy issue currently and not a medical or other type of issue. News media has therefore failed at setting the agenda for new cannabis policy because it has not properly shown the American public all the facets of the problem.

While some news organizations are making great strides, there hasn't been significant change across the entire field. National coverage has remained stagnant, addressing the policy issue and sometimes the medical issue but has yet to begin to regard cannabis as part of people's lifestyles; it's still an issue either extremely close to home (in the case of the often-used anecdotal evidence) or very distant (arrests, legislation, etc.). While several regional papers have developed sections and corresponding series and specialties, there is still a need at every level.

Conclusion: Is it an issue with American medicine in general?

The problems may extend far beyond the medical marijuana issue. A study of news media framing on the issue of opioid analgesic abuse in the U.S. (McGinty, Kennedy-Hendricks, Baller, 2016, p. 405) showed that news media framed opioid analgesic abuse as a criminal justice

issue rather than as a public health crisis as experts have deemed it. The issue here arises that the agenda set by news media focuses on the wrong aspects of the problem. The public will advocate for what they view as the resolution to the problem, but they are being told the wrong resolution because the problem is not being presented correctly. This problem in the set agenda then is similar to the framing issue with marijuana; people aren't being properly educated by the media about the problem and sources.

News media has also repeatedly misrepresented research on opioids and very likely added to commercial bias (Hochman, Hochman, Bor, McCormick, 2008, p. 1544). A growing trend exists in news media to exclude mention of company funding for research. Another recent and troubling observation is the referral of medications by brand names rather than generic names. In the 2008 study of widely circulated U.S. news on this subject as well as questionnaires filled out by editors from the 100 most widely circulated newspapers in the U.S., only two percent of newspapers had written policies stating that medications should be referred to by their generic names and only three percent had written policies stating that company funding sources of medical studies be reported. This is a problem cannabis may quickly run into as well. If a certain company is funding research then the results may be biased towards the products made by the company funding the research (Lexchin, Bero, Djulbegovic, Clark, 2003, p. 1167). It should be noted that they also found that research funded by drug companies was less likely to be published than research funded by other sources. With cannabis, the future is unclear for how studies may be conducted if the plant is lowered to a Schedule II or III listing. It is likely that large companies will throw their hat in and fund research for its possible medical benefits. If the news does not report the funding for those studies, consumers may not be able to properly discern fact from fiction. If cannabis's parts are divided in medical studies as well, separating

chemicals such as THC and CBD from each other, the use of brand names rather than generic could lend bias to the consumer and the argument. It presents a case for further problems with the future industry, problems that might be avoided if newsrooms changed their policies.

The question then must be asked: is the news media creating or only adding to the problem? The problems in portrayal are not limited to merely opioids and marijuana; the same issues are arising with the coverage of almost every drug. Why? One theory is that “comparative effectiveness research” (CER) is not being utilized (Gerber, Patashnik, 2010, p. 1). Health care has gone partisan, and while the FDA investigated the efficacy of drugs and medical devices relative to a placebo, adequate studies of drug vs. drug are not being done. “Some health experts believe that less than half of all care is supported by adequate evidence about its comparative effectiveness (CBO 2007; see also Wennberg 2004).” The problem of anecdotal evidence being used as fact is not only a problem with marijuana in news media but a problem with the American health care system in general. Decisions are being made across the health care field on the basis of anecdotes, local custom, and the personal experience of individual physicians (p. 3).

Recommendation for Practice

The federal government has considered rescheduling cannabis from time to time. If it does so again, the news media can and must present the information in an accurate and representative way. As it stands, consumers of news, even if they had read the majority of the news literature out there on cannabis, would be at a loss for understanding of the issue at hand. The news is not putting forward the crucial details which are needed to explain the true issues at hand. Citing a lack of research but not the reason why is a disservice to the public's news serves.

Citing existing research without evaluating its sources is also a disservice. Even peer-reviewed journals are not without fault. The reason the U.S. government agencies require so much research on food and drugs and all other things that affect American lives is that errors are made. Until any laws are changed the news media must take extra precautions then and evaluate sources and fully explain problems. If it does not, it risks adding to the continuing problems associated with this lack of data and, if cannabis does indeed hold medicinal properties as the anecdotes say, news risks prolonging people's suffering by not correctly setting this agenda.

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Interview Transcript: Alex Pasquariello

C: My first question is what was your introduction into the cannabis newspaper scene? I know you said you just got this position a couple months ago.

P: My introduction would simply be as a voracious consumer of news. Specifically news from my hometown of Denver. I started to see the cannabis beat be developed by The Denver Post, the Boulder Daily Camera and also an alternative newspaper here called Westword. I was based in the east coast working on magazines, websites and it brought me back here to Colorado, and I'm following along.

C: What sparked your personal and professional interests in cannabis?

P: (laughs) Well those are obviously different topics there. My professional interest is that, I think this is the most interesting journalism beat that we have going right now. I thought that when I applied for the job and it's been confirmed working here for 6-8 weeks now. The topics that fall under the umbrella of cannabis are just incredibly diverse. Everything from spirituality to medicine, life-saving medicine. I think on that level, it's the most dynamic, interesting beat out there. I think when I had an interview, I'm glad to be covering, today, as an example of the coverage, we're covering everything from veteran's affairs, a letter from the American Legion to the Trump administration requesting that marijuana be de-scheduled so they can study it for PTSD, and other stories were published today including a recipe for cannabis-infused poke bowl. So we're covering everything under the sun.

C: So what sparked then your personal interest?

P: I don't know what to say there, just a dude from Denver who has enjoyed cannabis throughout his adult life. I don't really think that my personal interest leads to my journalistic interest actually.

C: So you wouldn't see it as connected?

P: No more so as trying to cover beer or wine, which I have [sometimes] covered in my journalism career but I think a personal interest does definitely help.

C: If you can speak to it, how have you seen the news media change on the cannabis issue while you've been in the field and while you've observed?

P: I don't know if I could say anything about change as much as just to actually really start to cover in depth. I think when we talk to our congressional leadership, for instance, we hear them say that it's actually being taken seriously and when the topic again comes up in legislation it is not just booted and made fun of, stoner jokes, etc. but actually being taken seriously on a level from medical marijuana to social justice and trying to reform the criminal justice system. So in that regard, the immediacy went from zero to 11 in a four, five year period here lead by, I think personally, lead by Colorado legalization efforts but also including California's long-time medical laws and legalization as well as continued growth of that market in California.

C: So how do you as a journalist view the battle for legalization? Both the medical and recreational sectors? Part of what I've been doing with this project is looking at the framing, there's quite a few studies out there talking about framing theory and how even when cannabis, when they're saying that they're talking about it being medical they're actually framing it in a

policy way rather than a medical. Rather than as a medical issue they frame it as a policy issue. So how would you speak to that? I know that some of the stories that were covered for that were from your paper but before you were there obviously.

P: Well I think that one way, to be honest with you, looking at how I view it as a journalist, it's passionately follow the reporting and the facts. In terms of the framing, well I'm not sure how, I know my intent is in the medical to cover medical marijuana, as I've been saying it's capital J Journalism. From our reporting standpoint it's to cover the policy, I think one reason you see it framed that way, to be honest if I can interject there, is because there hasn't been the scientific research that they can put into that type of, that they can put into their arguments if that makes any sense. All the medical side is all anecdotal. For lack of actual medical research I think that's why you see it framed that way. My standpoint on the medical marijuana is to approach it with a capital J Journalism, be it angled from issues of health and wellness, fun and lifestyle, so that you can report on the medical issues involved. Does that make sense or answer your question at all?

C: Yes, that did. That was perfect. So then another aspect that I've been looking at for this project is also sources because there was a study on, I think it was just New York Times articles but the sources used for cannabis articles were largely, it was about the editorials and the op-eds as well and most of them the sources weren't exactly medical experts or science experts. It was mostly just the editors from different papers. So there were issues with the sources there. So how do you determine then that a source is credible for the Cannabist. Because as you just said there's a lack of research out there so then how do you find who to refer to, who to quote?

P: I think that goes back to your analysis of finding a lot of the coverage of medical cannabis framed from a policy standpoint because the cart has kind of been put in front of the horse on this one when it comes to medical. The scheduling of cannabis as a schedule I substance, by definition in the federal government, it says that they have high potential for abuse, there is currently no accepted medical use and that right there, that classification, as a baseline, just eliminates large scale research that would, to journalists, provide the ability to talk to researchers and scientists and universities about their studies, about their findings, peer-reviewed journals, none of that exists at least in the American system right now. There's a ton of great research coming out of Israel for instance, university studies, what was that guy's name, Dr. Mechoulam and what was the name of the university doing it...well I can't pull it up right now. The American system doesn't have that body of academic or medical research available to journalists. So what you find then is anecdotes, advocates and then policy. Until that schedule I designation is rescinded or modified, it's very hard to find the same traditional journalistic sources of doctors, researchers, peer-reviewed journal material that you could find on virtually any other medical topic. So then what do we do? Well we continue to report out for those who are fighting to have that research done. Where research is available we examine it and decide if it's appropriate but I do think that would be, to your point of framing medical, the whole issue through policy lenses and that's why we see that.

C: Perfect, thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add? I probably have enough here with what you've said so far.

P: No, I think if you're doing an analysis and finding that, well don't let me put words in your mouth, but you're finding that the majority of the journalism and media out there comes from a bit of an advocacy standpoint. I would say that's in line with everything I've read as I've done my

research coming into this gig. Which is why I think it sounds trite that I do come at it from a more dispassionate standpoint than a lot of the journalism that has existed thus far but that also has to do with the way that larger media organizations are covering cannabis and the way that it's been part of the War on Drugs for the last 20, 25, 30 years, whatever it's been.