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## Drugs in the Media: The Production of Hegemony

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***Drugs in the Media:  
The Production of Hegemony***

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**Abstraction**

*This essay critically examines how illegal drugs are represented throughout the media. It details the ways in which meanings about drugs are constructed in an attempt to make people conform to hegemonic ideals. Through examination of the different mediums and through consideration of those who control these outlets, this paper argues that the hegemonic ideals are made by promoting bias propaganda and education, misrepresenting information, censorship, and emphasizing the negative aspects of drug use. Finally, this paper addresses the negative implications of such representation.*

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## ***Drugs in the Media – The Production of Hegemony***

LYDIA LEE

In a world so dependent on technology, media has great influence over people. It can reach audiences all over the world in a matter of seconds. People who are deemed successful appear throughout the media and viewers in turn attribute a celebrity status to this success. Viewers internalize the messages the media presents in hopes of becoming successful themselves. In this sense, the media is an efficient mechanism of social control because so many people are exposed to it and internalize the influential messages being delivered.

Moral entrepreneurs determine what behaviours are socially acceptable and what behaviours are condemnable. With regard to drugs, policies are made to uphold political ideologies of moral entrepreneurs. While reinforcing political ideologies, these policies are not founded on scientific reasoning but predicated on moral values that favour the motives of those in power. The regulations on illegal drugs seldom reflect the common good of society; instead, the motivations are to attain conformity and uphold power.

Moral entrepreneurs use the media to create drug hysteria in an effort to make members of society conform. They present biased messages to the public telling them drugs are harmful or immoral. In turn, this allows for the development of a collective consciousness amongst members of society. Having a collective consciousness allows for members of society to support the government's actions with regard to the creation of policy and further encourages members of society to conform. It is an agent of socialization. The mass media is used to produce negative societal perceptions of drugs and drug use. It is a mechanism used to generate moral panics, and strong societal reactions against certain drugs (Montagne 2011: 849). Ultimately, the media is used as a tool for governments to maintain their position of power at the top of the social hierarchy. The media is a means to an end.

What is presented in the media about legal and illegal drugs is an attempt to maintain and reinforce political ideologies. *Hegemony* refers to certain social groups exerting social authority and control over subordinate groups by obtaining and moulding consent so that the actions and power held by the higher classes appear legitimate and natural (Lavoie, 2011:

912). Messages about substances that are legal often have no negative messages attached to them. Illegal drugs, on the other hand, are presented in negative ways to audiences in hopes of influencing people's choices. Illicit substance use in the media is often constructed in a manner that will legitimize and reproduce political ideologies (McKenna, 2011: 457). Thus, media representations of illegal drugs maintain hegemonic ideals through techniques of persuasion such as promoting propaganda, highlighting negative outcomes, providing false information, and censoring.

### **Propaganda and Education**

The media encompasses numerous instances of drug propaganda in an attempt to educate people in a way that is parallel to political agendas. Specifically aimed at children and adolescents, this is accomplished through public service announcements, anti-drug advertisements and moral messages featured on television shows and films. Media influences society through a process of social learning. Social learning theory suggests that people learn behaviour through social interaction and observation (Mosher, Clayton & Atkins 2014). The media influences people by producing examples of "acceptable" models of behaviour. By manipulating the viewer's feelings and perceptions of the material, this directs their beliefs and attitudes on a matter to be consistent with political agendas (Roberts, Henriksen, & Christenson 1999: 8). In terms of drugs and drug use, the media represents anything associated with illegal drugs to be dangerous and condemned, producing the message to target audiences that drugs are not socially acceptable.

Public service announcements are perhaps the most direct method of getting very specific messages spread to targeted audiences. In providing a means of combating illicit drug use by the government, public service announcements provide information and promote anti-drug ideals through media campaigns (Werb et al. 2011: 834). They appear throughout electronic media as brief commercials, delivering an anti-drug message to influence members of society. Public service announcements on illegal drug use are often targeted to adolescents in an effort to prevent youth from using or even experimenting. Therefore, the government only releases information that favours this objective. Many of these commercials serve as scare tactics to youth. The messages are intended to promote only the "ill" effects of illegal drugs with rarely any mention of empirical evidence that would dispute these objectives and

educate society's youth. Rather, commercials are filled with dark imagery featuring illicit drug users as mentally unstable, inebriated, and often lower-class individuals. These depictions are used in the hope to steer youth away from drugs without informing them about how to stay safe if they do use drugs.

Advertisements throughout the media also play a large role in discouraging illegal drug use. Many advertisements focus on highlighting the negative effects of illicit substances associated with people's health and well-being (Yzer et al., 2011: 279) in an effort to curb potential illegal behaviour from arising. For example, a brand known as *Above the Influence* is part of an anti-drug advertising campaign. Specifically, it targets youth aged twelve to seventeen and portrays marijuana as a negative influence (Carpenter & Pechmann, 2006: 948). *Above the Influence* cites numerous harmful effects of cannabis such as poor coordination and judgement, lowered learning capabilities, and the substance's addictive nature. However, the campaign fails to mention the positive aspects of the drug such as experiencing euphoria, stress reduction, and an increased awareness of the senses (Erowid, 2015). Drug advertisements, such as *Above the Influence*, are bias accounts that omit true facts and leave audiences without the ability to make informed decisions. Many of the more visual advertisements by *Above the Influence* depict users as insects; portraying the message that those who use illegal substances are a threat to society as they spread deviant behaviour. It is in this way that advertisements are used as propaganda.

Furthermore, messages within films are very influential social control mechanisms as the meanings of these messages are more subtle but correspondingly more powerful. It is often made clear within films and television shows, in reference to illegal drugs, of the daunting connections to other realities such as prostitution, gangs, and mental illness. Actors may portray a relatable position to the viewer which drastically spirals out of control with the use of illegal drugs and therefore serves as a scare tactic to viewers. For example, Kalvert's film, *The Basketball Diaries* (1995) features a youth who begins using drugs and becomes dangerously addicted to them. Both physical and social consequences are often emphasized throughout these mediums, persuading audiences to take ulterior, socially acceptable routes in life. Thus, the way films and television shows often represent illicit drugs uphold hegemonic ideals.

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## Emphasis on the Negative

Government policy makers try to maintain hegemony with regard to illegal drugs by utilizing the media to demonstrate the negative consequences of using. Once again, this concept can be understood in terms of the social learning perspective. If the audience observes drug use, there is potential for the behaviour to be mimicked. Imitation is based on the context of the event and through an evaluation of perceived outcomes deemed suitable for participating. Thus, if it is associated with negative outcomes, and would not be advantageous to participate, the individual is less likely to mimic the behaviour. That said, the media stresses the negative consequences of drug use to viewers so they will not see drug use as being advantageous and refrain from engaging in such activities. Presenting illegal drugs in a negative fashion serves as an effort to reroute social behaviour and beliefs.

Even films and television shows where the character's experience with drugs appears to be pleasant, the character still exhibits traits the majority of society avoids. While *Up in Smoke* (1978) promotes Cheech and Chong as having a good time, they are racialized and commit crime in the movie; thus, the already illicit drug use is associated with criminal behaviour and people of a lower social status. Further, *Trailer Park Boys* (2001-2015) features unemployed, lower class adolescent and grown men who are often intoxicated, involved in violence and crime, obnoxious, and unproductive. Most movies and shows featuring more pleasant instances of drug use are also comedies and not to be taken seriously by viewers.

Gang movies, on the other hand, link crime and drugs together. Often the lifestyles of the characters are depicted as tough, scary and risky. Gangster movies can be viewed as scare tactics. The organized crime industry itself is presented as scary in films. Also, there is a heavy association of police enforcement within these movies that reinforces the illegality of the matter. Taylor claims illegal drugs are presented to the public as so dangerous that criminal justice control is considered 'noble' (2008: 373).

Other negative consequences presented to viewers are the risky life styles of drug users. Sex, rape and violence are frequently linked together in movies and television. For example, Korine's film, *Spring Breakers* (2012) highlights the lives of highly sexualized teenage girls consuming drugs and engaging in violent crime. Other films depict the negative

physical consequences of drug use. Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996) includes characters involved with hard-core drugs in graphic scenes. Throughout the film, Renton, portrayed by Ewan McGregor, uses hard drugs and is often shown vomiting, suffering from distorted vision, and experiencing a loss of physical control over his body.

Negative implications of drug use are further apparent in discourses on the punitive consequences of illicit substances. News broadcasts featuring drug use often highlight a punitive reality to the viewers. These reports generally consist of social status based descriptions of the offenders; often demonizing the users and focusing on the legal repercussions ahead of them. Publicly emphasizing the negative legal and physical consequences of drug use directs people to an alternative lifestyle free of illicit drugs.

### **Media (Mis)representations**

Policy makers also try to legitimize and produce hegemonic ideals through the media by presenting biased and false information. This is intentional. Together the media and the government manipulate individuals into thinking a certain way about drugs and drug use, and essentially government officials form an opinion about drugs on the individual's behalf. This becomes embedded in the collective consciousness of society and the public support takes on a reality of its own beyond the individual, where public opinion becomes a reflection of the ideals presented in the media.

The news is one source of media that most people deem to be trustworthy. However, news stations, too, hold hidden agendas. One aspect to this is that they are funded by policy makers and therefore will serve the interests of them. Often stories in the news consist of exaggerations, distortions of information, and sensationalism (Montagne 2011: 849). Language used in news stories also tends to be very influential. Reporters on drug stories tend to connect drug terminology with other negative words such as crisis, fatal overdose, violence, and crime. The mere presence of two negatively perceived social facts constructs drug use as a problem.

Although not scientifically founded, nor fully understood, discourses on drugs in the media are often negative simply because they have been prohibited for so long people do not know any different. One example of this is a talk show by Fox News. The O'Reilly Factor features debates of controversial issues such as drug policy. Bill O'Reilly, the host, is a

prominent, upper-class, conservative male, and therefore, is highly influential. During interviews, he sets up the debates to feature guests who are socially constructed as having a lower social status than him (women, adolescents, and other races), making him seem more powerful and intelligent, thus influencing viewers to agree with his views. In the talk show O'Reilly often cuts his guests off and speaks over them to ensure he has the last word. The O'Reilly Factor is just one of many examples of the media trying to promote biased messages to get people to conform and accept policy enactments without questioning their legitimacy. The false content the media presents on drugs is a large factor in upholding hegemonic policy. People believe what they hear. If a "trusted source" states something, factual or not, many believe it without question and form opinions based on the information that they are provided.

Drug use is also represented inaccurately in the media as a criminal problem (Roberts, Henriksen, & Christenson 1999). Engaging in drug consumptive behaviour is often associated with committing other criminal activities to feed an assumed addiction. They are presented as dangerous criminals. However, there is seldom any regard for the structural root causes of why people engage in drug activity. Some may use it instrumentally so they can adhere to the pressures of being a productive member of society (Goode, 2012:9). Others may use it recreationally to disengage from the social world and relax (Osborne & Fogel 2008: 562). Others may seek out illegal drugs due to the convenience of it. To elaborate, the true rationale for using drugs may be because one's social position does not allow them to obtain drugs in a legal fashion; therefore they must resort to illegal measures. The lack of social understanding contributes to people continuing to believe moralistic understandings of drug use, further preventing evidence-based evaluations for change in policy.

### **Censorship**

Biased perceptions of drug use are presented throughout the media because of the content restrictions imposed on anything counterhegemonic. The reasoning for censorship is often founded on moral and political reasoning. Governments impose these restrictions attempting to make illicit drugs taboo. If people are limited in their exposure to drugs, their opportunity for involvement decreases.

While the music industry is fairly open and free from restrictions, government still

maintains control over what is heard through censorship (CRTC, 1991). On the radio for instance, there is a large amount of restriction on what is aired. While popular artists' songs are still played, drugs references are often cut from the song. For example, in Sheryl Crow and Kid Rocks's song, "Picture" the word cocaine (an illegal substance) is censored from the song. However, whiskey (a legal substance) is deemed acceptable for the radio. Selectively excluding certain terms and phrases implies that it is immoral or taboo to talk about drugs since they are essentially equating words such as "molly" (which is a reference to MDMA) with profanity. The followers within society who do not think critically receive this subliminal message and may connect illicit drugs with prohibition and immorality.

The same censorship is apparent on social media websites such as YouTube. YouTube has several safety restrictions in place. Their policy on harmful or dangerous content holds they will remove content that encourages illegal activities (YouTube 2014). Therefore, references to illegal drugs may be removed upon request. YouTube also has age restrictions set for certain content so people under the age of 18 are censored from inappropriate things, such as illegal drug references. Content such as music videos, which feature stars using drugs, are banned from minors as an attempt to "protect" them. Further, even an educational video on drug use can be banned, as it may be viewed as encouraging illegal activities and promoting immoral activities.

Similarly, on the Internet more generally, there are government officials who filter the entire web for content that contests the hegemonic ideals (Abdulhamid & Ibrahim, 2012). They have the power to shut down websites that encourage anything they are trying to control. Further, there are serious legal repercussions for people who do try and endorse illegal drug use. For example, the online black market, Silk Road, was shut down and the owner arrested in an effort to prevent the encouragement of drug use and drug trafficking (Browne, 2014). Authority reacts to the promotion of illicit substances very quickly in an attempt to maintain control.

## **Conclusion**

The way in which the media works is complex. From those who control it to those who view it, messages are cast throughout society promoting hegemonic ideologies which condemn drug use. Government officials and policy makers make every effort to maintain a

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collective consciousness, resulting in people agreeing to principles they may not fully understand. Again, these principles are predicated on moral values and for political purposes. Regardless of the criminal classification of certain drugs, maintaining social power is given priority. By demonizing specific social groups, the government and media can continue to influence people in a way that is advantageous to them. Material presented in the news is not based on factual understandings of drugs; but instead, coverage is focussed more on social exclusions (Taylor, 2008: 375).

Through the many outlets of mass media, members of society are flooded with biased information on illicit drug use which prevents them from making informed, healthy decisions. While the way in which drugs are represented in the media may reinforce hegemonic ideals, there are also serious consequences for promoting these ideals. Such consequences include lack of trust in authority leading to rebellion, continuing systemic prejudice based on social status, minimal opportunity for social reform, limited understanding of the sociological aspects of drug use, and inadequate knowledge. Policy oriented messages based on biased material leads people to either view drugs as something to be avoided or, alternatively, fear the risk of involvement within the criminal justice system.

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