



## Research paper

# The role of the media in the science-policy nexus. Some critical reflections based on an analysis of the Belgian drug policy debate (1996–2003)



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Drug policy is one of the most polarised subjects of public debate and media coverage, which frequently tend to be dramatic and event-centred. Although the role of the media in directing the drug discourse is widely acknowledged, limited research has been conducted in examining the particular role of the media in the science-policy nexus. We sought to determine how the (mis)representation of scientific knowledge in the media may, or may not, have an impact on the contribution of scientific knowledge to the drug-policy making process.

**Methods:** Using a case study of the Belgian drug-policy debates between 1996 and 2003, we conducted a discourse analysis of specially selected 1067 newspaper articles and 164 policy documents. Our analysis focused on: textual elements that feature intra-discourse differences, how players and scientific knowledge are represented in the text, the arguments used and claims made, and the various types of research utilisation.

**Results:** Media discourse strongly influenced the public's and policy makers' understanding as well as the content of the Belgian drug policy debate between 1996 and 2003. As a major source of scientific knowledge, media coverage supported the 'enlightenment' role of scientific knowledge in the policy-making process by broadening and even determining frames of reference. However, as the presentation of scientific knowledge in the media was often inaccurate or distorted due to the lack of contextual information or statistical misinformation, the media may also support the selective utilisation of scientific knowledge.

**Conclusions:** Many challenges as well as opportunities lie ahead for researchers who want to influence the policy-making process since most research fails to go beyond academic publications. Although media is a valuable linking mechanism between science and policy, by no means does it provide scientists with a guarantee of a more 'evidence-based' drug policy.

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## Introduction

'Evidence-based policy' proposes that drug-policy makers should be informed by scientists and other drug experts, so that policy will reflect accurate knowledge rather than political biases (Ottoson & Hawe, 2009). Various theoretical models of knowledge utilisation and empirical studies described throughout literature have made a particular attempt to explain the complexities and nuances of knowledge utilisation within the policy-making process, even in heavily politicised domains (Weiss, 1979; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2003). These authors argued that scientific knowledge

was often not necessarily directly relevant to policy decisions as put forward in the so-called 'instrumental model', which is linked to the notion of 'evidence-based' policy-making, but could influence in other significant ways, namely by altering the language and perception of policy-makers ('enlightenment model'). It was also acknowledged that knowledge utilisation may involve issues of 'political power' (e.g. selective use of scientific knowledge may satisfy the 'short-term' objectives of policy-makers). The 'evolutionary model' assumes that some aspects of scientific knowledge may suit the interest of powerful groups, whereas other aspects may not. In general, it became clear that many players are involved in the policy-making process (Kingdon, 2002; Sabatier, 1998) and that scientific knowledge is just one of the factors contributing to the policy-making process, alongside to ideology, values and interests (Weiss, Murphy-Graham, Petrosino, & Gandhi, 2008; Hoppe, 2005; Stevens, 2007; Monaghan, 2011). In 2001, Lindquist actually

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introduced a new concept, the so-called ‘third community’, a reference to Caplan’s (1979) ‘two-communities’ hypothesis, to embrace all relevant players standing alongside the science-policy nexus: e.g. interest groups and the media.

This paper addresses the particular role of the media in the science-policy nexus in the drug-policy field. Given the central role of the media in drug-policy debates, this issue is of considerable importance for those who aim to better understand the complexity of the nexus. Existing studies on the influence of the media on the drug policy-making process have already highlighted a number of roles.

First, according to key media theories, the media can be perceived as a powerful player because of its ability to present issues through selection and salience, so called ‘framing’, and the ability to indirectly shape individual and community attitudes towards risk, known as ‘priming’ (Lancaster, Hughes, Spicer, Matthew-Simmons, & Dillon, 2011; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Thus the media can, unintentionally as a result of the characteristics of news production (e.g. limited space, driven by publicity and economic concerns) or rather strategically, make a significant contribution to what people think by affecting what they think about (Entman, 1989; Lancaster et al., 2011). The role of the media in determining drug discourse is widely acknowledged. Several researchers already argued that the media may fuel ‘drug scares’ as well as increase curiosity in a new drug or stigmatise particular drug users (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Lenton, 2007). The emergence of methamphetamine use and production in Canadian media provides one such example. Coverage by the media was found to have fuelled public fear and speculation by using terms such as ‘epidemic’ and ‘plague’ to describe the prevalence of this drug (Boyd & Carter, 2010).

Second, as policy-makers aim to understand what the public values and considers important, the media may also feed into political debate and decision-making (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Studies about the precise role of the media in setting the political agenda often provide contradictory results, as the influence of the media in political agenda-setting strongly depends on the type of issue covered, the specific media outlet, the kind of coverage and the features of the political system at stake (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The role of the media in shaping policy is even more disputable (Christie, 1998). Nevertheless, some examples suggested that media may play a key role in precipitating drug-policy change. For instance, through media-generated panic, in a number of months new and emerging psychoactive substances (like mephedrone and so-called ‘legal highs’) had shot to prominence in the political agenda demanding action from the government. Eventually, this resulted in a change in the legal status of these substances in some countries (Bright, Bishop, Kane, Marsh, & Barratt, 2013; Dabrowska & Bujalski, 2013; Lancaster, Hughes, Spicer, Matthew-Simmons, & Dillon, 2010; Van Hout & Brennan, 2011). As another example, in an Australian study of press coverage concerning a proposed heroin trial, the media portrayals of heroin users as ‘deviants’ presented by opponents of the trial strongly influenced the political demise of the heroin trial (Elliott & Chapman, 2000).

Even though the importance of the media’s role in the drug policy-making process is widely acknowledged, the issue whether and how the media actually affects the science-policy nexus remains understudied. Some studies (Lenton, 2004; Lancaster et al., 2011; McArthur, 1999; Ritter & Lancaster, 2013; Weiss & Singer, 1988) suggest that the media may act as a ‘linking mechanism’ between those who wish to influence policy (e.g. scientists and interest groups) and the actual policy-makers, for example, once research findings have been covered by the media, they might be harder to ignore. On the other hand, it is also acknowledged that disseminating scientific knowledge through the media might be a ‘risky’ business as the media often provides misinformation

or unbalanced stories, leading to a distortion of perception and helping to construct dominant overarching narratives (Carvalho, 2007; Macgregor, 2012). For example, media’s distorted attention to the ‘crack epidemic’ in the late 1980s led to concern about drug use nationwide and provided support for the radical right-wing political agenda (Hartman & Golub, 1999). While scientific knowledge debunked the various myths emanating from this media scare and gave a rather different picture, media stories did not correct any mistaken claims leading government to step up its ‘war on drugs’, especially towards ‘dangerous’ groups living in ghettos (Reinarman & Levine, 1997).

This article focuses particularly on how the representation and misrepresentation of scientific knowledge within the media may, or may not, have an impact on the contribution of scientific knowledge in the drug-policy making process. By using a case-study, we do not only want to understand how accurately the media report on scientific knowledge in a particular context and time frame, but are also interested in the implications of the media discourse on the contribution of scientific knowledge in a particular policy-making process.

## Methodology

We illustrate how the media may contribute to the science-policy nexus by drawing upon a case study of the development of Belgian drug policy between 1996 and 2003 (Tieberghien & Decorte, 2013). During this particular period, the foundations of the current Belgian drug policy were laid. In 1996, a Parliamentary Working Group (PWG) was appointed to investigate all aspects of the drug phenomenon. A report produced by this working group was based on several national and international expert hearings. The participating experts were working within all areas of drug policy and for the first time in the Belgian policy debate it was recognised that the drug problem is a multidisciplinary and complex phenomenon (including health, prevention, social and security elements), which requires an integrated and integral approach. In 2001, the key points recommended by the PWG were explicitly included by the Government in an official document: the Federal Drug Policy Note. Since then, the drug phenomenon has been officially recognised as an ongoing social reality and a matter of public health, a ‘normalisation policy’. The third milestone (2003) concerns the adoption of these viewpoints within Belgian legislation through the implementation of two new laws modifying the original but outdated drug law of 1921.

Our case study pursues a qualitative methodological approach, including a (critical) discourse analysis of policy and media documents published between 1996 and 2003 (Fairclough, 2003; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). The case study forms part of a larger study that also involved the use of key informant interviews. With the aid of the discourse analytical approach of Fairclough (2003), discourse is seen as ‘the use of language as a form of social practice’ meaning that discourse is inherent in every social action and interaction. Here, discourse is also seen as the product of power because it embodies what is understood to ‘make sense’, to be ‘true’ or to wield ‘authority’ (Burchell & Foucault, 1991; Fraser, Hopwood, Treloar, & Brener, 2004). Such an approach systematically describes the various strategies of text, and relate these to the social or political context (Hajer, 1995; Vianello, 2011). Our analysis consisted of a detailed and systematic reading of the policy and media documents. In both cases, we particularly focused on: the textual elements that characterise (differences between) discourses (e.g. the terminology and definition(s) of drug use or drug policy options used and the use of existential, prepositional, value assumptions); how players are represented in the text and from which perspective or viewpoint; how (scientific)

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