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Framing marijuana: How U.S. newspapers frame marijuana legalization stories (1995-2014)

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Abstract

Marijuana legalization has been one of the most controversial issues in the public health field. Since news frames can influence the public's perceptions about public health policy including marijuana legalization, it is important to understand how the media report this issue. Thus, we explore how U.S. newspapers present marijuana legalization stories, examining two key dimensions of framing: an organizing theme and a story tone. We analyzed news articles of national and regional newspapers between 1995 and 2014 ($N = 640$). Findings revealed that newspapers have largely presented marijuana legalization as a law enforcement issue, rather than an economic issue or a medical issue. Marijuana legalization has been differently presented according to each presidential period. Overall, marijuana legalization stories have been described using a neutral tone. However, findings showed that newspapers that were classified as politically liberal adopted a positive tone more frequently than newspapers that were classified as conservative. Our findings can help public health providers or policy makers understand the relationships between news stories and public opinion toward marijuana legalization. Conclusively, this study can provide a comprehensive analysis of news framing of marijuana legalization, examining two key dimensions of framing: organizing theme and story tone.

Keywords: marijuana legalization, news framing, organizing theme, story tone, content analysis

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