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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A B S T R A C T

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)

knowledge was represented: e.g. statements about the nature, type and (perceptions of) quality of this researches, the relationship of scientific knowledge to other forms of information available, the players/networks referring to or discussing these scientific results and their motivations, and the various types of research utilisation.

In the case example, *policy documents* included formal, publicly available expressions of strategy and statements of intent made by the Federal Government, as well as parliamentary discussions. Given the Belgian context of this study, the databases of the Federal Government and Parliament were searched, first using general key words like 'drugs', 'drug use', 'substance use', but eventually refined keywords such as 'drug policy', 'Parliamentary Working Group Drugs', 'Federal Drug Policy Note', and 'drug/cannabis law reform'. A strategy used to ensure that all relevant documents were retrieved for analysis and to prevent the exclusion of documents that might be marginally important or balance the narratives selected included an additional search with the keywords 'legalisation', 'decriminalisation', 'depenalisation' as these words were included in most of the initially selected documents. This search resulted in a total of 164 policy documents, which we have analysed.

In our study, *media* analysis examined Belgian (including Flemish as well as Walloon) newspaper articles. Most of the articles published in the Flemish or Walloon newspapers were collected from online media databases. However, as these databases have only been available since the end of the 1990s, our search was completed by examining archives. A total number of 1067 articles were selected and analysed using the same search strategy as with policy documents.

The work in collecting and analysing the policy and media documents was completed by one researcher over a thirteen-month period. We are aware that discourse analysis is always a matter of interpretation (Davies, Francis, & Jupp, 2011; Tieberghien, 2011), even more so since the reliability and validity of the results depended entirely on the cogency of one researcher's arguments and bilingual abilities. Although French is not the researcher's mother tongue, her French-speaking abilities allowed a profound analysis. Nevertheless, interpretations were gradually tested against associated literature about the case and among the members of the steering committee.

Findings

Media discourse on the development of Belgian drug policy

Our analysis showed that newspapers defined public and political interest. From the beginning of the Belgian drug policy debate, media reporting has tended not to focus on the diversity of issues underpinning Belgian drug policy (e.g. international drug production and methadone and/or heroin substitution). Instead, media attention has come down to the legitimacy of the criminalisation of cannabis. A heated media debate about the advantages and disadvantages of legalisation, decriminalisation or depenalisation obstructed 'rational' discussion about the wide range of Belgian drug-policy issues involved. Headlines related to the PWG (1996–1997) refrained this focus. '*Commission on drugs. White smoke on the legalisation of cannabis*' (*27 June 1996, Walloon newspaper La Peuple*). Very often drugs were discussed in terms of 'soft' drugs versus 'hard' drugs, and frequently the general concept of 'drugs' was used to refer to a particular substance such as cannabis. A series of articles published in Flemish and Walloon newspapers claimed '*Protecting toddlers against drugs*' (*17 March 1999, Flemish newspaper Het Nieuwsblad*); '*Soft drugs: laxness and trivialisation*' (*26 March 2003, Walloon newspaper L'Avenir*). The time spent and space given to the legitimacy of the criminalisation of cannabis resulted in the public and policy-makers evaluating the development of

the Belgian drug policy on the basis of the cannabis dimension ('priming'). For instance, MPs as well as the general public directed almost every discussion related to Belgian drug policy towards the stipulations regarding cannabis policy by formulating many questions or interpellations on the cannabis policy direction and by interest groups organising public demonstrations, sometimes pleading for and sometimes advocating against the 'legalisation' of cannabis.

While reducing the complexity of the Belgian drug-policy discussion to a single element, the media contextualised the cannabis issue in a rather confusing way. Concepts like 'legalisation', 'depenalisation', 'decriminalisation' were frequently interchanged and used incorrectly. '*Depenalisation is the elimination of criminal penalties. Decriminalisation refers to a policy tolerance: it involves maintenance of criminal penalties in the criminal law without any application in practice*' (*8 September 2000, Flemish newspaper De Morgen*).

Similarly, although policy-makers emphasized in parliament that they refused to specify a quantity for personal cannabis use in order to avoid simplification as well as dramatisation of cannabis use, newspapers claimed the Dutch point of view ('5 g' limit). '*It is still unclear how the quantity for personal use will be interpreted. Probably, policy-makers will apply the Dutch limit of 5 grams*' (*20 April 1999, Flemish newspaper De Morgen*). Since then, the difficult and ambiguous interpretation of 'quantity for personal use' has dominated the cannabis debate.

Furthermore, media coverage complicated the debate by reporting some internal communication between policy-makers as well as some preliminary versions of the Federal Drug Policy Federal Drug Policy Note. As a result of politicians leaking to the media, the headlines wrongly argued that 'legalisation' of cannabis as well as of other illegal drugs was applied. Flemish newspaper Gazet van Antwerpen dealt with this issue as follows: '*Injecting and snorting until death: it is allowed*' (*18 November 2000, Flemish newspaper Gazet van Antwerpen*). Ministers' attempts to repair the damage were not successful: a public and political storm blew up, resulting in many parliamentary questions and interpellations.

Finally, media contextualisation of the debate did depend on which part of the country one lived in or which newspaper one read. The Flemish media paid far more attention to the drug phenomenon than the Walloon media. At the same time, both parts of the country presented the debate differently. The Flemish media discourse was largely informed by a biomedical approach inspired by articles focusing on the relationship between cannabis use and cancer or the risks of heart attack. The Flemish newspaper De Standaard implied that '*Cannabis also contains more carcinogens than tobacco. Three joints are equivalent to 20 cigarettes*' (*1 December 2000*). We also discovered a strong focus on warning messages and alarm signals. There was frequent use of terms like 'danger', 'death', and 'disease' (often linked with 'legalisation' of cannabis). '*The latest PMA death provokes thought about whether or not to legalise soft drugs. Reality shows that it can go terribly wrong*' (*12 February 2003, Het Nieuwsblad*); On the other hand, the Walloon media had a more nuanced but critical approach, largely focusing on the unproblematic nature of persistent (cannabis) use. '*The challenge is to speak the truth [...] It was previously demonstrated that there are a lot of myths [...] Overdose and the risks of a hepatitis C pandemic are often discussed but self-control strategies of drug use, proven to be successful, not*' (*21 November 2000, Walloon newspaper Le Soir*). In addition, in both parts of the country, the media discourse seemed to be intertwined with the newspapers' political ideology. The political orientation of a particular newspaper, Flemish or Walloon, also worked as a powerful selection device in how the drug phenomenon was presented. Both discourses discussed above were also interchangeable. For instance, a biomedical approach was represented in the Walloon newspaper La Dernière Heure: '*Cannabis is more*

harmful to users' lungs than exposure to tobacco' (*12 November 2002*).

Coverage of scientific knowledge in the media

Newspaper articles frequently included expert opinions, police statistics, prevalence rates, emergency cases and international studies. On the one hand, newspapers included scientific knowledge as a 'response' to an event that had taken place or was brought to attention. For example the Flemish newspaper De Morgen reported: '*. . . according to a study commissioned by the Ministerial Cabinet, which the newspaper could consult,. . .*' (*18 November 1998*). On the other hand, scientific knowledge was presented as factual information by the media itself. '*An American study has shown that 10% of the people who ever experimented with drugs get addicted*' (*14 May 1998, Flemish newspaper Gazet van Antwerpen*).

Nevertheless, analysis revealed that the presentation of scientific knowledge in the media was often inaccurate or distorted. First of all, newspapers commonly omitted methodological and contextual information. Prominence was given to very general and vague labels of scientific knowledge. '*An experimental study has shown that [. . .] These studies also focused on [. . .]*' (*26 March 2001, Walloon newspaper La Derniere Heure*). Equally, any bibliographic information (e.g. the names of researchers and their institutional affiliations) was often left out, which makes it difficult to assess the credibility of the source quoted.

We found several examples of statistical misinformation. For instance, some Flemish newspapers reported a lifetime prevalence rate of cannabis use of 40% among the Belgian population (sample of 1200 respondents) while the original report mentioned a lifetime prevalence of 21% among a representative sample of 3311 respondents. Similarly, some newspapers talked about lifetime use, others about recent or occasional use. For example, by using the 'big number' strategy of presenting lifetime prevalence rates on 'drugs', some newspapers claimed that the 'drug problem' was worsening. '*Youngsters are increasingly flirting with joints. Approximately 40% of 17–18 year olds have used soft drugs at some time.*' (*12 March 2002, Walloon newspaper Le Soir*).

At the same time, newspapers presented scientific knowledge in a rather simplistic and one-sided way. In line with the preceding findings, the scientific knowledge or experts quoted by the newspapers depended on the part of the country and the political orientation of the newspapers involved. In particular, journalists seemed to not pass up their story by displaying research results or experts (e.g. scientists or professionals) which would contradict it. For instance, even though the 'stepping-stone theory' has proved to be unsustainable and lacking any real evidence base, this perspective still trickled down into the media discourse without any comment. '*Studies in the U.S. have shown that one in 10 of 18 year-old youngsters gets addicted. In other words, the progression from soft to hard drugs is much easier than a few years ago.*' (*27 February 1999, Flemish newspaper Het Nieuwsblad*). Where journalists shy away from contradictory research results or experts, they tend to prefer finding any 'authority' who will confirm their story. As they often cited e.g. football players or musicians, in this case the whole issue of what media regards as a so-called 'authority' on drugs is questionable. '*Cannabis use is the most normal thing in the world according to six Flemish celebs*' (*8 March 2000, Flemish newspaper De Morgen*).

In their drive for sensationalism, journalists at times provided additional information or included their own interpretations without taking the original scientific perspective into account. '*It is clear, cannabis use is really harmful*' (*9 December 2000, Flemish newspaper De Standaard*).

Finally, in a moment of calm, some newspapers took the opportunity to '*recycle*' scientific knowledge that had been published earlier. Although these results were 'old', newspapers presented them as 'new' (by using active verbs). While it had been discussed before in Flemish newspapers De Standaard (July 1997) and Gazet van Antwerpen (October 1997), another Flemish newspaper presented the particular registration study (regarding the number of prosecutions in Flanders) as 'new' in April 1998. '*While presenting the new Ministerial Directive [. . .] Antwerp researchers announced that the number of booked drug users has never been so high*' (*28 April 1998, Flemish newspaper De Morgen*).

Roles of media in the science-policy nexus

The development of the Belgian drug policy provides a clear case where the media seems to have an impact on the contribution of scientific knowledge in the drug policy-making process. We illustrate each role by linking our findings with the theoretical models relevant to the science policy nexus.

First of all, due to the media's priming and contextualising in both parts of the country, the public and policy-makers were invited to believe that the Belgian drug-policy debate involved a choice between only two positions. Cannabis use is either harmless (or at least less harmful than alcohol) and hence should be decriminalised (if not 'legalised'), or cannabis is harmful to health and therefore its use should continue to be prohibited. Within this framework, media statements (more than scientific knowledge) succeeded in triggering a series of interpellations and questions or in influencing the actual passing of new bills or resolutions. In those particular cases, media coverage was often used strategically to promote or discuss a certain cannabis-policy direction. '*Headlines speak the truth. I quote the Belang van Limburg: "Free Cannabis" [. . .] That message is given to youth. More generally, I would like to know if an 18 year-old or a group of 18 year-olds are allowed to smoke cannabis?*' (*Intervention by MP Vlaams Blok, extreme-right Flemish party*).

Furthermore, it became clear that scientific knowledge which was repeatedly or extensively included in newspapers stood a good chance of playing a role in parliamentary activities. MPs clearly acquired information about scientific knowledge as contextualised in newspaper articles. '*On 18 December 1999, a newspaper reported that researchers discovered that cannabis smoke is much more carcinogenic than tobacco smoke*' (*Intervention by MP Vlaams Blok, extreme-right Flemish party*). However, the inclusion of scientific knowledge as represented by the media is highly prone to '*political utilisation*'. The lack of any contextual information in media coverage (e.g. 'researchers') as well as the selective inclusion in the media of scientific knowledge or expert opinion, dependent on the ideological and geographical differences between newspapers, both resulted in policy-makers picking and choosing what is most supportive of their discourse. For example, an MP of the French-speaking Christian Democrats argued in Parliament that there is a link between drug use and suicide while the scientific research, as presented by the media, mentioned that 34% of them were thinking about suicide (without any direct link to drug use). '*25% of young people become drug users. [. . .] A survey shows that 34% of young people thinks about suicide. The weakest groups must be protected: young people (under 12) should not be drug users. Drug use may be accompanied by committing suicide.*' (*Intervention by MP PSC, French-speaking Christian Democrats*).

Nevertheless, our analysis showed that media coverage of scientific knowledge is not necessarily a precondition for playing a role in the policy-making process. For instance, a policy-funded evaluation study conducted by Prof. Dr. De Ruyver and Prof. Dr. Casselman (2000), which really gave direction to Belgian drug policy and could be perceived as an example of '*instrumental knowledge utilisation*', was not repeatedly or extensively covered by the media.

The media also played a significant role in empowering the '*enlightenment*' function of scientific knowledge in our particular case. For instance, it was media coverage, and not scientific knowledge, which initially shaped political action in Belgium. The debate on Belgian drug policy was mainly initiated by an MP of the French-speaking socialist party (PS) who, in the Walloon newspaper *Le Soir* (17 November 1995), publicly emphasised that he would submit a proposal to decriminalise cannabis possession. Although it was only a threat – he did not submit his proposal – it initiated the political and media debates on drugs and drug policy in Belgium. By means of generating public reaction through a series of newspaper articles ('*PS wants to legalise cannabis*'; '*Cannabis negatively affects concentration*'; '*Cannabis is the most popular drugs*'), the media succeeded in placing an item on the political agenda, which in turn increased the likelihood of action on the part of the Federal Parliament and the Government. In particular, the Federal Parliament took the initiative to establish a PWG. '*The use of hard or soft drugs in our country is a highly topical issue. A major public debate on drugs, particularly on soft drugs, sparked off in the last few days [. . .] Parliament should take a prominent role in discussing a topic which arouses a great deal of emotions and anxiety in society.*' (*Memorandum of the Parliamentary Working Group*). A number of hearings of national and international experts were organised in order to develop a clear and timely view on all aspects of the drug phenomenon in Belgium.

In addition, a sustained media focus on scientific studies on the increasing THC concentration, the increasing prevalence rates, the health risks of cannabis use and the 'precautionary principle' increased the likelihood of policy-makers being more sympathetic towards the harmfulness of cannabis. In other words, the media encouraged refutation of the argument of the advocates of a liberal policy that cannabis use is harmless (cf. '*evolutionary model*'). These themes were captured in the following quotations: '*Cannabis is twice as strong as 10 years ago*' *(2 March 2001, Flemish newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws); 'Faced with such a number of health risks, we cannot hesitate in making an appeal to the 'precautionary principle'* (*28 March 2001, Walloon newspaper Le Soir*). Even though none of these findings (Vuillaume, 2008) (which were limited, of poor quality and generated equivocal and conflicting ideas) informed political debates in Belgium before 2002, this topic featured increasingly in many parliamentary discussions from 2002–2003 onwards. Even the selection of experts for the hearings regarding the new drug-law debates (2002–2003) was clearly influenced by this viewpoint: medical practitioners and psychiatrists were now much more considered as experts in this matter.

Conclusions

Although the effect of the media is not always so obvious given the multiple factors that may affect policy, drug use and community perceptions, media discourse strongly influenced the publics' and policy-makers' understanding as well as the content of the Belgian drug-policy debate. We found evidence of the power of the media in defining public interest ('*agenda-setting*'), in contextualising issues through selection and prominence ('*framing*') and in indirectly shaping individual and community attitudes towards risk ('*priming*'). It became clear that, since drug policy is a highly politically sensitive issue, the media narrowed down the focus to one single element and stimulated further confusion and conflicting interests. Within this framework, media contextualisation largely depended on which part of the country one lived in as well as on which newspaper one read.

The media discourse on the development of the Belgian drug policy also appeared to feed into the drug policy-making process. On the one hand, the media itself seemed to be a powerful player in setting the policy agenda. MPs frequently showed their care and concern about a public issue discussed in the media by asking parliamentary questions or addressing it in a speech. On the other hand, policy-makers also feed into the media. Because policy-makers leaked some internal communication between policy-makers as well as some preliminary versions of the Federal Drug Policy Note to the media, media coverage further complicated the debate by extensively reporting about it.

Although the primary target population of the media remains the general public, and not policy-makers and/or scientists (Weiss & Singer, 1988), a major way in which policy-makers hear about scientific knowledge is through the media. However, media coverage has some special drawbacks: it is interlinked with ideology and sensationalism as well as with disclosure and economic concerns that push accuracy way down the list of values (Coomber, Morris, & Dunn, 2000). The starting point for journalists is what makes a 'good story' that fits in with their particular framework and narrative. In a heavily politicised and mediatised debate such as drugs, media is often far less critical than scientists would prefer. Media reports have tended to exaggerate scientific knowledge by drawing on numbers in a selective manner and by describing them one-sided or in more dramatic terms which obscure their actual use. Moreover, the use of 'authority claims' such as 'researcher' or 'expert' does not make a particular discourse 'true'.

Furthermore, once scientific knowledge is presented by the media, it is indeed harder to ignore it in the policy-making process (Lancaster et al., 2011). MPs frequently adopt these media references to scientific knowledge in order to set the policy agenda. The general visibility provided by the media may increase the likelihood that other policy-makers will also have read or heard the story and that they will have to be ready to answer questions or counter interpellations in Parliament. In shaping policy action, media coverage may support the '*enlightenment' role* of scientific knowledge by broadening and even determining frames of reference ('*evolutionary model*'). However, using the media by no means guarantees that scientific knowledge has a direct bearing on policy or that drug policy will be more evidence-based ('*instrumental model*'). Because of the often different, additional or false interpretations provided by the media, there is even higher risk of political utilisation of scientific knowledge presented by the media ('*political/tactical model*'). Within this framework, policy-makers do not and often cannot seek further information regarding scientific knowledge picked up through the media.

Through the rich and detailed discussion of the role of the media in the drug policy-making process and in the science-policy nexus in particular, one may conclude that many challenges as well as opportunities lie ahead for researchers who want to influence the policy-making process. As the media is an instrument by means of which policy-makers may receive scientific knowledge, we may assume that researchers who want to influence policy have to aim for wide coverage by the media. The media has the necessary platform to quickly put issues on the public agenda and has access to policy-makers, who in turn have easy access to the media. However, in heavily politicised and mediatised domains, the relationship between science and policy appears much more delicate. Scientists have the final but crucial responsibility in deciding whether the media is the most appropriate mediator in disseminating scientific knowledge, since most research fails to go beyond academic publications (Ritter, 2009).

Conflict of interest

None.

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