

An Investigation of Print Media's Portrayal of the Opioid Epidemic

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Abstract

The United States has witnessed a massive rise in opioid-related overdoses and users seeking treatment. Media narratives surrounding drug-related issues have historically set a precedent for how the issues are addressed and handled publicly. Through content analysis, this study found that print media framed opioid addiction as a public health issue and associated it much less with crime than typical drug-related coverage. This study also examined how favorable the public policy response was to opioid cases in comparison with the crack epidemics in the late 1980s. This is partly because white, rural communities are most heavily affected, and pharmaceutical companies played a significant role in the rise of addicts.

I. Introduction

Over the last 40 years, the United States has witnessed a multitude of drug-related societal issues that have consumed politics, education, and the media. Since 2001, the U.S. has experienced a rise in a new form of drug abuse: opioid addiction. According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, opioids “are a class of drugs that include the illicit drug heroin as well as the illicit prescription pain relievers oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine, fentanyl and others” (American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2016). Addiction to opioids typically stems from habit-forming opioid prescription drugs, where addicts later tend to switch to cheaper drugs like heroin or fentanyl. Opioid-related drug overdoses have doubled between 2000 and 2014 (Meldrum, 2016). In 2015, the Center for Disease Control reported that 78 people die every day from opioid overdoses in the United States, which has almost quadrupled since 1999 (Seelye, 2016).

In times of new public health issues, citizens historically have turned to the media to educate themselves and fully understand the complex issues facing society. When the media either knowingly or unknowingly disseminates false information or harmful stereotypes about drug-related issues, the public's perception and public policy response are then skewed. “For much of the population, it is the news media that serve as the central link between problems and perceptions. Thus, there is a linkage from the problem to the scholarly understanding of that problem, to the dissemination and impressions among the general population, and finally to the development of public policy responses” (Golub & Hartman, 1999, p. 423).

This troubling pattern was seen widely throughout print media coverage of the Crack Scare, the sharp rise in crack use in 1986. During July, August, and September 1986, drug-related coverage made up 5% of

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all national media (Orcutt & Turner, 1993). While only 3% of Americans believed drug abuse was America's most important problem, that number grew considerably to 64% by 1989 (Golub & Hartman, 1999). The media narrative surrounding the rise in crack typically explained it as a "violence inducing, highly addictive drug that created a plague of social problems, especially in inner city communities" (Coyle, 2002). The false stigmas perpetuated in the media resulted in harsh sentencing laws for crack users, with African American men most often arrested. The long-standing effects of the Crack Scare are still evident within society today, and countless studies have attributed heightened media coverage and the dissemination of hyperbolized information to the intense public response and harsh legislative reactions (Golub & Hartman, 1999).

In print media coverage around opioid addiction, the media narrative is entirely different. While crack was portrayed as an African-American drug, opioid addiction has been painted as a middle-class, white American public health concern, rather than a criminal justice issue. It is crucial to examine print media's tendency to stereotype and hyperbolize drug-related information and how that affects societal understanding and awareness (Hansen & Netherland, 2016). This paper examined how print media has framed the opioid epidemic through analyzing the different themes, topics, and narratives found throughout its coverage.

II. Literature Review

To fully understand the importance of drug-related media coverage and both its past and current racial implications, it is important to review past research and other related findings. Research has found that there has been a historical pattern of racial stereotyping in drug-related coverage, which affects the framing and tone of the media coverage (Beckett et al., 2005). This leads to the social construction of drug epidemics and can cause intense media frenzies, like during the crack epidemic and now during the rise in opioid addiction and overdoses. In current-day media framing of the opioid crisis, there are noticeable and stark contrasts from the way the rise in the crack was explained to America by print media. The following research helps outline that and provides context for the findings of this paper.

Print Media Portrayal of Drug Addiction

When the U.S. saw a massive rise in crack use and addiction between 1984 and 1990, print media consistently reported the issue (Hartley & Miller, 2010). While intentions were to educate readers about a drug crisis invisible to many, the coverage displayed a substantial pattern of racial stereotypes and "media myths" that both perpetuated false stigmas and heightened public fear. A 2008 study found that the media has adopted a stance against "problematic" drug use that associates drug addiction and drug users as dangerous and likely to commit further crime (Stuart, 2008). The study also found that instead of discussing the fundamental issues surrounding a rise in drug use, media tended to simplify complex issues, which further ostracized crack users from society and promoted their status as inner-city criminals (Stuart, 2008). These media practices not only promote wrongful stigmas against drug addiction, they also tend to simplify the demographics reached by certain drugs and the massive societal implications that come from heightened fear surrounding public safety.

During the rise of the crack crisis, journalists experienced increased pressure to report on the issue and explain the rise in context. This often led to hyperbolic and manipulated data imagery used in print media to inflate and dramatize the situation at hand. An analysis of drug-related print coverage in 1986 examined how print media used numerical data and statistics to dramatize the situation (Orcutt & Turner, 1993). Multiple situational examples, including a content analysis in *Newsweek's* "Coke Plague" story, found that journalists were "stretching the 'true' numbers in the . . . report considerably" (Orcutt & Turner, 1993, p. 203). One of the major explanatory reasons found by the researchers was the intense pressure placed upon the media to report breaking and newsworthy stories; data manipulation and hyperbole were a strategy used to heighten interest in the topic and sell more copies (Orcutt & Turner, 1993).

Print Media's Construction of the Crack and Opioid Epidemics

During the first few years of the rise in crack use in the mid-1980s, the substantial spike in usage became a point of fixation for print media. However, the way print media narrated the issue began to influence and shape public perceptions (Himmelstein, 2013). One study analyzed which result print media chose

to print from the 1985 *Monitoring the Future* national survey. The research found that print media were specifically choosing data over long time periods to dramatize the actual drug crisis (Himmelstein, 2013). The research also found that media were hesitant to report on positive new trends and used language to minimize progress. For example, a report examined by the researchers that follow this trend wrote: "Although overall drug usage among young people continued a trend of gradual decline last year, the United States still has the highest rates among the world's industrialized nations" (Himmelstein, 2013).

The societal effects of pinning a certain stereotype on addicts can be crucial depending on their respective drug addiction. In 2016, research in the *Journal of Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* found troubling facts about print media's portrayal of opioid addicts (Hansen & Netherland, 2016). After conducting a content analysis that tracked the media narrative surrounding recent opioid use, researchers found that "media portrayals of race and opioids points to the critical role of racialized imagery and narratives in general public support for disparate policy responses in drug control" (Hansen & Netherland, 2016). The research also examined the concept of dehumanization in drug-related media coverage; articles about African-American addicts typically omit any backstories of family and home life, and instead, simply deal with the facts, while articles about white drug users often describe their communities and provide context (Hansen & Netherland, 2016).

Common Print Media Myths Regarding Drug Addiction

In a time of intense media scrutiny and pressure upon journalists to deliver hard-hitting news coverage, a steady stream of misinformation and media myths took up a substantial amount of reporting efforts during the rise in crack use between 1984 and 1990. While the factuality of these myths has long ago been debunked, a 2014 research study of crack-related media coverage found that a common media trend to heighten the intensity of drug coverage was to set crack apart from other drugs (Levine & Reinerman, 2014). One of the most effective and widely used strategies was to say crack was an entirely different drug than cocaine (Levine & Reinerman, 2014). The media, while informing audiences that crack was instantly addictive, began using words like "epidemic" and "plague" to describe the increased use (Levine & Reinerman, 2014).

A content analysis of *The New York Times*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* articles covering crack use between 1985 and 1995 uncovered a concerning pattern of myths perpetuated in print media and the disappointing lack of correction after research deemed the myths false (Golub & Hartman, 1999). The study found that in 1986, 66% of *The New York Times* articles about crack perpetuated at least one myth (Golub & Hartman, 1999). In 1995, this number had only decreased to 30%. One study also found that almost all crack use reports were based on urban users, even though this didn't represent the national drug use overall (Golub & Hartman, 1999). The article explains the top three crack-user myths perpetuated by the media: crack is the most dangerous drug; it leads users to violent behavior; and crack dealers are very wealthy (Golub & Hartman, 1999). This study measured the volume of crack-related articles between 1985 and 1995 and how the rise was communicated to the public.

The current author analyzed opioid-related drug coverage throughout 2016 in both national and local print media to investigate how the opioid crisis has been framed and whether harmful drug-related stereotypes have been perpetuated. The author specifically asked one research question: What kind of information, statistics, and imagery did print news media use to narrate and frame the rise in opioid addiction?

III. Methods

A content analysis was performed to investigate how opioid abuse has been depicted by the media. Both national and local media were examined to better understand how the issue was explained at both the big-picture and local levels. A content analysis uses a systematic approach to reading text that allows the researcher "to yield inferences from all kinds of verbal, pictorial, symbolic, and communication data" (Krippendorff, 2004). When print media began growing in popularity at the start of the 20th century, quantitative newspaper analysis grew in popularity to analyze the standard of information being released to the public (Krippendorff, 2004). Because of the media's influence on the public, "an attempt to determine with quantitative exactness the degrees of influence exerted by different types of newspaper material on different sections of the public would appear to be justified by the possible services rendered both to propagandists

and (if there is a difference) to those interested in political education” (Woodward, 1934, p. 526). Quantitative newspaper analysis has served an important role in promoting journalistic integrity and ensuring that the public is receiving the best information as possible (Woodward, 1934).

This study analyzed the content of all articles containing the word “opioid” from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *New Hampshire Union Leader* published between November 1, 2016, and December 31, 2016. Each article was coded for four main categories: general information, characteristics of user/users, response to opioid-related issue, and perpetuation of stereotypes. The quantitative analysis allows for the identification of common practices, stereotypes, and topics discussed in the overall media opioid abuse narrative.

The *New Hampshire Union Leader*, the highest circulated newspaper in New Hampshire, was chosen to obtain insight into the local-level framing of opioid abuse in a state that has seen one of the highest jumps in 2016 opioid abuse and overdoses. The full coding sheet can be found in the Appendix.

IV. Findings

The selected sample included 55 articles from *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and the *Union Leader*. Among the articles, news stories accounted for 67%, while news analyses for 20% and feature stories for 13%. The news stories were typically centered on new legislation, new research, and medical findings, or criminal activity, while the news analysis and feature stories tended to focus on particular addicts and the far-reaching complications of opioid addiction. The *Union Leader* articles were primarily news stories (88%) and were shorter in length, which is not surprising given it is a local media source. While *The New York Times* had the fewest total number of articles that were the longest on average (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Different Coverage by Three Newspapers of Drugs

Publication	Total # of Articles	Average Word Count	Article Type
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	19	965	News Story: 7 News Analysis: 7 Feature Story: 5
<i>The New York Times</i>	12	1090	News Story: 9 News Analysis: 1 Feature Story: 2
<i>Union Leader</i>	24	618	News Story: 21 News Analysis: 3 Feature Story: 0
Total	55	891	News Story: 37 News Analysis: 11 Feature Story: 7

The opioids mentioned throughout the article noticeably mentioned heroin and fentanyl at a much higher frequency than any other frequently abused opioid. In fact, 46% of all articles specifically mentioned heroin and 37% mentioned fentanyl. It is interesting that heroin is the cheapest and only street-level drug in the following table.

Table 2. Coverage by Newspapers of Different Types of Drugs

Publication	Oxycontin	Hydrocodone	Oxycodone	Heroin	Fentanyl	Total
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	2	0	5	14	10	31
<i>The New York Times</i>	0	2	2	6	5	15
<i>Union Leader</i>	0	0	0	11	10	21
Total	2	2	7	31	25	67
Total (%)	3	3	10	46	37	100

As opioid overdose rates rise in the United States, medical personnel must combat the drug potency and find certain opioid antidotes that will allow for the patient’s breathing to normalize, which can be used at the scene of the overdose and have a significant impact on opioid overdose reversal (Brown, 2017). Naloxene has grown to be one of the most widely used and effective antidotes; however, it was only mentioned in 7 (10%) articles. Methadone and Buprenorphine, two opioids used to treat addiction were mentioned in 7 (10%) and 5 (7%) articles, respectively.

User Demographics

A total of 21 total opioid addicts referenced in the sample: 14 (67%) were men and 7 (33%) were women. The average age of men was much higher than the women: 32 for men and 24 for women. Of the 14 articles that mentioned the location of opioid use, 79% were in rural settings. Twenty-two percent of articles mentioned criminal action taken specifically against an opioid addict, and 36% depicted illegal drug activity involving street-level drugs.

Of the seven women referenced, five were pregnant or had given birth while addicted to opioids. The pregnancy narrative was a clear theme within the opioid coverage of women and detailed the harsh realities of birthing a child who is opioid-dependent and having to withstand withdrawal symptoms. When speaking about specific female users, only mothers in rural areas were included, a clear emphasis on the fact that this is affecting rural areas at a higher rate. While highlighting one region of New York, a *Wall Street Journal* article stated that “A new study found births of infants exposed in the womb to heroin and other addictive opioids grew more than sixfold in rural communities between 2004 and 2013, versus more than threefold in urban areas.” While these rates are astonishing, almost any narrative surrounding female opioid users centered around pregnancy and childbirth.

The View from Washington

As pressure increases on legislators to ramp up treatment efforts for opioid addicts, media not only report on government progress, but also draw conclusions on the best ways to handle the massive rise in opioid abuse and emphasize policy areas that the epidemic is affecting, ultimately framing the issue for readers. Of all articles in the sample, 31% mentioned either certain politicians who were working to improve opioid abuse or legislation, current or potential. Of all articles, 25% mentioned healthcare policy in relation to addiction; however, only two articles mentioned the massive rise in hospital costs that the opioid epidemic has created.

Hyperbolized Language

As discussed in the literature review, the language and types of information used in drug-related articles affect the way the issue is framed in terms of severity. A common theme throughout all three publications was the use of hyperbole to dramatize the situation at hand. This practice is misleading and has the potential to negatively impact policy reform, as was seen in the crack epidemic (Hartley & Miller, 2010). For example, a *New York Times* article quoted a D.E.A. agent speaking about fentanyl stating, “It’s

essentially the serial killer of drugs. It's not something you can use for any kind of duration and survive." While Fentanyl is an incredibly potent and dangerous drug, there are thousands of Americans living with fentanyl addiction who have lived with it for long durations. Another example comes from a *Wall Street Journal* article that stated, "The average opioid abuser is not a pain patient. He or she is a non-patient who pilfers the medication from unsuspecting relatives, buys it on the gray market, or finds a so-called candy man." Not only is this factually incorrect, but it perpetuates incredibly harmful stereotypes in a medium incredibly influential to society. The use of hyperbole along with the spread of negative stereotypes was primarily evident in the national publications, while the *Union Leader* seemed to be making a cognitive effort to inform the public and provide realistic and relevant statistics and quotes.

Villainizing Big Pharma

The role that the pharmaceutical industry plays in opioid abuse is one of the most crucial areas of the epidemic. Many are seeking to hold pharmaceutical companies responsible due to their role in motivating the massive rise in opioid prescriptions (Meldrum, 2016). A third of all articles in the content analysis mentioned misconduct on the part of pharmaceutical companies and a clear focus on blame that was directed toward the industry. A *Wall Street Journal* article quoted an addiction doctor stating, "'Part of the blame for the epidemic,' Dr. Lembke says, 'rests with the pharmaceutical companies, which have been heavy-handed in their promotion of narcotics to doctors. Meanwhile, she argues, Big Pharma has exaggerated the number of Americans with chronic pain, inflating the figure to 100 million when 25 million would be more realistic.'"

A Call for Treatment over Justice

One of the most common themes among the articles was the importance of treatment options for addicts over criminal consequences. Of all articles, 42% emphasized treatment and recovery as the best option for combatting the opioid epidemic, compared to 9% that argued for criminal justice responses. For example, New Hampshire began a supervised drug court program that allowed opioid addicts facing jail time to receive treatment options and a job contract instead. Public safety was consistently cited as the top concern for law enforcement and public officials, and increased jail time was never mentioned. A common reason used to advocate for treatment was financial benefits, as one *Wall Street Journal* article did. It cited a Surgeon General's report saying, "Every one dollar invested in brief primary care intervention saves more than \$27. A dollar spent by intervening at a hospital saves over \$36, or \$9 in an emergency department."

The major juxtaposition of this public health response toward opioid addiction vs. the crack epidemic was mentioned once in a *Wall Street Journal* article, which discussed the replacement of jail time with treatment options for addictions. It wrote: "Similar programs have also drawn criticism from some African-American leaders, who believe public officials now frame the opioid epidemic as a public health crisis— rather than a criminal issue— because most opioid abusers are white."

V. Conclusions

Opioid abuse and addiction is a complicated and severe epidemic that crosses gender, racial, and class lines. This content analysis investigated the kind of information, statistics, and imagery journalists are using to narrate and frame the rise in opioid addiction in print media. Historically, print media has followed a pattern of over-inflating drug-related societal issues and perpetuating stereotypes about certain drugs and addicts (Hartley & Miller, 2010). The opioid crisis has been a unique drug-related issue because the population of addicts is 90% white and 75% from rural areas (Cicero, Ellis, & Surratt, 2014). Additionally, 75% of users become addicted to opioids by taking prescription drugs (Cicero et al., 2014). As a result, people responded to this problem as a public health issue instead of a criminal justice problem (Hansen, 2016). This content analysis found that almost half of all articles specifically mentioned treatment and recovery options as the best way to combat opioid addiction. Only five articles of the entire sample cited arrests or legal punishment as a productive way to help addicts. This is a sharp contrast to the crack epidemic response, which was increased law enforcement and drug sentencing (Coyle, 2002).

The gender and age of the users were misrepresented. While only 33% of users mentioned were women in the sample, a JAMA psychiatry report revealed there are now almost equal numbers of women

seeking heroin treatment as men (Cicero et al., 2014). While the average age of men mentioned in all articles was 32, the report said that the real age is closer to 22 (Cicero et al., 2014). To properly inform the public of this health issue, it is imperative that print media educate the public about the population most heavily affected instead of feeding stigmas about opioid users.

This content analysis revealed that while the sampled articles still occasionally used the same hyperbole and negative stereotypes utilized during the Crack Scare in the late 1980s, the opioid crisis has been framed as an entirely different drug epidemic. The overall tone of the coverage was heavily sympathetic to white opioid users compared to the coverage of the Crack Scare, which villainized addicts as violent and dangerous. In turn, the public response and policy changes have reflected this, and have taken an entirely different route than the Crack Scare. The articles showed overwhelming support for treatment and recovery, some even citing the future financial benefits it may have on society. Researchers who analyzed the media coverage of opioid stated that “white opioid images have helped to carve out a separate space for white opioid use in the popular American imagination, one that leads to racially stratified therapeutic intervention and works to further insulate white communities from black and brown drug threats, leaving intact law enforcement crackdowns on black and brown urban residents in the name of public safety” (Hansen & Netherland, 2016, p. 664). While these societal changes on how to handle drug epidemics is positive and refreshing, it is disheartening to know that much of it is due to the demographics of the addict. To fully inform the public and limit negative media repercussions on policy change, it is essential that print media move away from the historical trend of feeding stereotyped imagery and stigmas and work on creating a complete view of the issue at hand, regardless of race, class, or location.

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Appendix

Coding sheet

Date	
Publication	<i>The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Union Leader</i>
Article Name	
Article Type	News Story, Feature Story, News Analysis
Location	Urban, Rural
Word Count	

Included Mentions of:

Criminal action taken against addict	Y/N
Healthcare Policy	Y/N
Hospital Costs	Y/N
Illegal Drug Activity	Y/N
Pharmaceutical Industry/Prescription Abuse	Y/N
Political Perspective	Y/N
Mention of Pregnancy/child born addicted	Y/N
Call for recovery or justice	Y/N

Characteristics of Users:

Age	
Race	
Gender	
Details about their addiction story	

Type(s) of Drug(s) Mentioned:

Hydrocodone	Oxycodone	Heroin	Fentanyl	OxyContin

Type(s) of Antidote(s) Mentioned:

Naloxone/Narcan	Methadone	Buprenorphine