

## ***Media Representation of Marijuana Legislation*** **DYLAN J FORMAN<sup>1</sup>**

It is imperative in today's society that we analyze the excessive media content that is constantly shoveled in front of us from a variety of sources, many of which are secretly laughable in their validity. An issue that has received distorted representation is the legislation on marijuana; beginning with the War on Drugs, and progressing through cracking down on arrests due to marijuana, the media portrayal of marijuana followed the political position and placed a strong negative stigma on the substance. This characterization presented a skewed reality based on personal agendas and ideological leanings than a dispassionate account of marijuana's medical, cultural and social value. This is important as it played an important role in shaping a culture of criminalization of marijuana, despite scientific and scholarly studies on the benefits of marijuana. The lack of attention to scholarly and scientific studies, and toeing of the political agenda in news reports suggest that media suffers from personalization, dramatization and strong authority disorder bias. From the standpoint of society, this demands that we interpret information more thoroughly than take it at its face value, a challenge that can be best addressed through improving quality of education.

In June of 1971, in a televised address President Richard Nixon declared the "War on Drugs," a pivotal point in the history of marijuana, listed as a Schedule One drug along with hard core drugs such as crack and cocaine. The labeling of marijuana as 'dangerous,' however, was shortsighted and driven by an agenda of political funding, rather than a careful examination of scientific studies on marijuana. For instance, President Nixon rejected the Shafer Commission report that unanimously recommended decriminalizing the possession and distribution of marijuana for personal use. This is an example of the political agenda of criminalization of an essentially harmless (and often even helpful) drug.

Media's portrayal of the Presidential agenda and the War on Drugs, instead of carefully scrutinizing the policy and vetting the claims, toed the line of the federal government. Marijuana obtained a stigma that hasn't left after over forty years. This was significant in the political support for President Reagan's 1986 speech on the "Campaign Against Drug Abuse," extending support to prohibition of marijuana. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the incarceration rates resulting from marijuana charges skyrocketed. As arrests increased for drug related incidents, funding to law enforcement agencies increased. Naturally, officers began arresting more and more for the most minor of offences with any remote correlation to marijuana. In 1980, the number of people incarcerated for nonviolent drug related offences was around 50,000. By 1997, this total increased by an astonishing 800%, with more than 400,000 individuals behind bars for nonviolent drug offences.

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Driven by political hysteria, the percentage of Americans that saw drug abuse as the nation's number one problem climbed from between 2-6 percent to an astounding 64 percent by 1989. It is blatantly obvious, and even common sense, that the problem of marijuana use isn't what caused this change. Instead, it was the negative image placed on the substance throughout the media.

The reporting of criminalization of marijuana and its social implications rarely questioned federal government's intent and rationale. This can be attributed to three kinds of biases (Bennett, 2003). The first is authority disorder bias when the political agenda is focused on the restoration of authority in society. In the case of reporting on the War on Drugs and the campaign against drug abuse, the disproportionate political coverage of drug offences legitimized the actions of authorities. As a result, law enforcement agencies focused on making more arrests, even for small offences, rather than addressing societal problems.

A second form of bias is the dramatization bias: the art of storytelling becomes a central point for news outlets, more important than holistic coverage. It often focuses on 'crisis over continuity.' Dramatization bias is most vividly seen in the use of social media to propagate ideas. While this has been largely favorable towards legalization efforts, it can also be a crutch many times when the emphasis is on selling a story, rather than research on the subject. For example, US Magazine recently posted an article discussing the issue of legalization of marijuana with actor and director Morgan Freeman (Boardman, 2015). While the message of the article was to legalize pot, the story carried weight not for its research on the subject, but the celebrity involved. Morgan Freeman's view on the subject were his personal opinions and not based on any extensive research on the subject. As a result, the message of legalizing marijuana almost took on a jokingly amusing tone.

The positive, and arguably proper, argument of legalizing the substance becomes blurred when not supported and portrayed in the right light. For example, the Harvard Law Review recently published an article in which a former judge and now law professor explains the abundance of positive results from legalization in Colorado and how these results could be applied nation-wide with further legalization (Blake and Finlaw, 2014). Even though this article is a thorough research on legalization of marijuana, it takes a back seat in the media because it doesn't contain the flash of a celebrity who starred in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Another example of a quality resource regarding the issue of marijuana legalization is a recent article in the McGeorge Law Review entitled, "Sorting Through the Science on Marijuana: Facts, Fallacies, and Implications for Legalization," which provides a scientific analysis of marijuana's impact on human health. This article is rooted in facts and science by prominent doctors and professionals and makes clear distinctions regarding marijuana as a substance (Danovitch, 2012). These assertions are the types of stories that should be on the news, as opposed to a popularity contest that is actually distorting media airwaves.

The third form of media bias is personalization bias. This is when a media outlet (in this case a newscast) focuses on an individual human tragedy or the negative elements of a story instead of looking at the larger picture in terms of

societal, economic, or political impacts. An example of this is local news coverage of bust of pot operations that place a negative connotation on the operation and arrest. This representation popularizes an idea of criminal enterprise, thus overlooking the societal and economic contexts.

Conversely, positive stories of marijuana use remain underreported as crisis draws more ratings than a feel-good story typically does. Media reports are tuned more towards dramatizing a story and focusing on negative elements. For instance, the story of Jayden David, whose life was saved through cannabis pills, did not receive attention. Since he was born, Jayden had suffered from very serious seizures over a dozen times every single day; by the time he was 5-years old, Jayden had taken over 25,000 prescription pills in his lifetime with little improvement. As a last resort, his father gave him cannabis pills (a medical form of marijuana), and this completely stopped his seizures. Jayden was able to be weaned off of the abundance of prescription pills to which he had become dependent, and was able to speak with his family. This is an example of an incredible story where marijuana literally saved a life and created a happiness that can't be bought. However, instead of seeing these stories on our local news, media follows a track of representing marijuana as an illegal substance.

The significance of these distinctions in media representation is important because the improper information or news centered on celebrity misconstrues public perceptions about marijuana. Instead, we should strive for a society that demands accurate information rooted in facts, which simply can't be supplied by somebody like Morgan Freeman or Ja Rule. It is vital to make these distinctions clear so that we, as a society, sift out the bad media content and overpower ignorance through education.

The key to solving the problem of media misrepresentation is therefore to improve the nation's educational system, which has declined in recent years. Sixty-six percent of all U.S. fourth graders scored "below proficient" on the 2013 National Assessment Of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test, meaning that they are not reading at grade level. Even more alarming is the fact that among students from low-income backgrounds, 80-percent score below grade level in reading. In 2012, the United States ranked as the 27th nation in terms of mathematical proficiency worldwide.

This shows that we have considerable work to be done to bring up the level of education. With the educational system reaching such a trough, the economic advantages of taxes that would be shoveled to improve the public school systems in those states could help increase the quality of education for the future of our nation. If we are to improve the quality of media information that is retained, then we need to improve the education of the people who are gluing themselves to the media stories. Then, the people will see the truth behind the information being shoveled in front of them and this blatant opposition can create a desire for more accurate and quality information

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