

**The Media**  
and Its Coverage  
of Illicit Drug Issues



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## Introduction

The news media are an extremely important influence in Australia. To a great extent, they set the agenda for public discourse (Gabrosky and Wilson, 1989: 1).

Despite frequent acknowledgment of the importance of the media in influencing public opinion and policy in relation to illicit drugs, very little research has been done which examines the extent and nature of its influence. Even less research has been done which examines the media portrayal of drugs associated with ethnic groups. The nature and implications of media influence on illicit drug issues, particularly in relation to its portrayal of drugs associated with ethnic groups, is the subject of this paper. Far from reducing drug problems, it is suspected that media reports '...promote the behaviour they claim to be preventing' (Brownstein, 1991: 97). Brownstein points to the promotion of the reactionary 'war on drugs' strategy in the United States which, he believes, has exacerbated the drug problem.

To a greater or lesser degree, attitudes to illicit drugs and, arguably, the drug scene itself, have been influenced and shaped by the media.

## Background: the Media's Influence on the Drug Scene

In his study of drug scene in Smith Street, Fitzroy, Fitzgerald believed the media had played a crucial role in changing perceptions of Smith Street from a '...quiet shopping strip into a street of conflict...' (Fitzgerald, 1999: 27).

Like most people, drug users read newspapers and consequently can, and do, learn about new dealing/using areas from mass media as well as through their usual peer networks...in Fitzroy...a heightened media focus has resulted in increases in the drug trade on Smith Street as a response to the media reporting (Fitzgerald, 1999: 92).

It has long been suspected that the detailed reports often seen in newspaper reports – about where and how to buy drugs – actually act as free advertising for the drug market, and directly affect the dynamics of street level drug markets:

Journalists must realise that they have a responsibility for the effects of their styles of reporting, particularly when advertising locations where drugs are bought, the streets where it's sold, the best quality, its price and how to buy it (Rodd and Leber, 1996: 94).

We have asked drug users what they did when they 'couldn't get on' in their usual location and they would nominate somewhere else and we would say: 'How did you know that?' and they would say they had read about it in the *Herald Sun* (Academic key informant, 1999).

Detailed media reporting of times, prices and locations of illicit drug deals obviously has implications for health and safety. It has been suggested that reporting of the details of drug overdoses may contribute to further drug overdoses by giving information about where to get high purity heroin. A national workshop on opioid overdose recommended that the media restrict reporting of illicit drug overdose in a similar way to the restrictions on reporting of suicide (Lenton et al, 1998).

In Sydney too, media reports are suspected of promoting and developing drug scene locations:

In Cabramatta in the early 1990s there was hardly any heroin problem. It was only after media reports started to be published about illicit drugs in Cabramatta that suddenly there were people flocking in to buy and the market grew in response to the increased demand (Criminal intelligence key informant, 1999).

A senior Melbourne police key informant interviewed early in 1999 had had personal experience of the power of the media in influencing the drug scene:

We have people coming down from Sydney because of the publicity. You have to be very careful what you say because if it is reported they will come from everywhere. We have had papers from Cairns sent to us, which are reporting on things we said that were in the press down here (Police key informant, 1999).

## **The Media's Influence on Public Opinion and Policy**

The mass media play a crucial role in the social construction of reality because knowledge of many social phenomena is obtained solely through the media rather than through direct experience...the mass media has evolved...to become the dominant player in the...reality construction process (Surette, 1994: 133).

The Premier's Drug Advisory Council (Victoria) found that the community obtains information about illegal drugs primarily from the mainstream media (Premier's Drug Advisory Council, 1996). Brownstein argues that the media has played an important part in shaping our view of illicit drugs and that 'Drug scares are independent phenomena, not necessarily related to actual trends or patterns in drug

use or trafficking' (Brownstein, 1991: 94). Chermak also found that the rise and fall of drugs as important political issues in the United States did not coincide with changes in the reported incidence of drug use (Chermak, 1997). Enactment of federal drug legislation was also found not to be related to objective data on drug use, but rather to politicians' own efforts to promote drugs as a social problem (Jensen et al, 1991). The same pattern is seen in reports concerning youth, many of which focus on illicit drug use.

If the media has a role in influencing public opinion and public debate, it follows that the media must also influence the views and policies of politicians. As an illustration of this, Gabrosky cites several case histories in which the media covered stories in ways so sensationalist that levels of public concern were raised to a point where they led to legislation extending police powers and thereby reducing citizens' rights. When the stories were examined later it was found the media had in fact fabricated a juvenile crime wave and had used patently emotive language in its coverage of drug and prison issues:

Whether it be in the area of drugs, juveniles, organised crime or ethnic and racial conflict, the media, by frequently exaggerating and reporting isolated events, tend to encourage public perception of a crime wave where in fact none may exist. Sometimes the creation of this wave can be done with the active cooperation of parties with an interest in it, such as moral entrepreneurs or politicians (Grabosky and Wilson, 1989: 130).

Usually government action is once removed from the media reports themselves. The media reports will appear, public opinion will have a chance to develop, and then political reaction is seen. In late 1995, media reports of heroin use in the western suburb of Footscray became a major impetus for the formation of the Premier's Drug Advisory Council. This resulted in the State Government directing an additional \$25 million to the alcohol and drug field to address the issue of illicit drug use in the community (Reardon, 1996).

Occasionally, the link between media reports and political action is more direct. For example, in Sydney in late January 1999, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on its front page a story of a 12 year old boy injecting heroin (in fact he was 16 years old) outside a needle exchange service. The reaction next day was for the NSW Health Minister to suspend the needle exchange service pending a full report (Overington, 1999).

Similarly police, like the rest of the population, are exposed to the media. It has been argued the media has an influence on police views, and possibly actions, just as it has on members of the public and politicians:

The media is responsible to a great degree for not only the public's views on illicit drugs and organised crime, but also the views of police. Media reports are a big part of current perceptions on both sides (Criminal intelligence key informant, 1999).

In Canada, the media has been blamed for creating a public perception that immigrants commit much crime. While there was considerable political debate in Canada in the 1990s about whether race-crime data should be collected, the debate also affected the issue of immigration. A number of opinion polls suggested that crime by new immigrants was an important component in Canadians' attitudes to immigration policies. The major explanation for this appears to be:

...increased attention to the problem of 'immigrant' crime by the media...in the early 1990s there was considerable coverage of crimes by 'gangs' of immigrants from China and Vietnam...More recently, the emphasis has shifted to Somali refugees...It is worth noting that a major review that demonstrated that the foreign-born were highly unrepresented in the population of those incarcerated for violent crimes received little publicity in the news media (Palmer, cited in Tonry, 1997).

Media focus on crime and immigrants also precipitated changes in Switzerland. Press reports in the mid-1990s shocked the Swiss public with their exposé on the large proportion of foreigners and asylum seekers among arrested drug dealers, and the inability of the police to deal with the problem. Consequently, Swiss deportation laws were tightened up to allow more rapid deportation of illegal aliens (Killias, 1995: 378). In addition, large-scale heroin prescription programs were initiated so that '...crime is no longer as commonly perceived as being directly related to immigration' (Killias et al, 1995).

Sercombe found that while the youth-crime focus is common in the media, the proportion of youth actually committing crime is tiny when compared with other factors in their lives – factors that are arguably of much greater long-term concern, not only for the public but also for policy makers. Sercombe found that about four per cent of the youth population was arrested for crime in the study period, while their unemployment rate was close to 30 per cent. Nevertheless, only 4.5 per cent of stories about youth appearing in *The West Australian* from April 1990 to March 1992 dealt with youth unemployment, while 45 per cent dealt with youth crime (Sercombe, 1997).

## **Outside Influences on the Media**

One could argue that just as the media can influence the behaviour and views of the public, police and politicians, then police and politicians, and, to a lesser extent, the public, can also influence the media. Certainly, the media frequently appear to be responsive to issues considered by politicians to be important. Brownstein shows how this pressure is felt in the United States, particularly at election time, and points out that it is not in the interests of the news reporters and producers to construct news in ways unfavourable to government, for fear of having their information supply cut off entirely (Brownstein, 1991).

There is probably a similar relationship in the Australian context with politicians. However, this type of relationship is particularly obvious between the media and police. Australia's police reporters have a cheap and immediate source of

information through police media relations units. Chermak found that the process of choosing events to be publicised is often influenced by a symbiotic relationship between reporter and police officer. Police are aware that some forms of crime are easier to prosecute if the media dramatise them. No doubt, police are aware that perceptions of crime waves and certain levels of public insecurity are conducive to increases in police personnel, capital resources and powers (Grabosky and Wilson, 1989: 130).

In a study of drug reports in the news media, Chermak found that reporters' main sources of information were from courts and police (58 per cent). These sources were used extensively for reasons of efficiency to meet media deadlines. Given the volume of information being secured through police and court sources, it would obviously not be in the best interests of journalists to criticise those sources for fear of losing access (Chermak, 1997: 701).

...according to media analysts, a close relationship develops between the media and police in which journalists are given privileged access to crime stories, and the police are given privileged access to the media (Sercombe, 1997: 50).

The Australian media's apparent shift in focus in the way that they deal with stories about illicit drugs – from sensationalist in the 1995–97 period to more 'problem solving' in the 1998–99 period – certainly corresponds with the timing of police thinking about the illicit drug problem. At the time of the well-publicised police drug raids on gay nightclubs in 1996–97, sensationalist stories about drugs were the norm. In 1998 and today, reporting on drug issues tends to be less sensationalist, and this has coincided with a much more liberal approach to the policing of drug offences, including police trialling of drug cautioning programs and calls by police for other solutions, such as safe injecting places (*Herald Sun*, 18.2.99).

## Creating the Drug Crisis

In the 1980s, the 'new right' and President Ronald Reagan used drugs as an '...all-purpose scapegoat with which they could blame an array of problems on the deviance of the individuals who suffered them' (Brownstein, 1991: 86). With this focus, attention was diverted away from the government's social and fiscal policies that arguably were the real cause of the escalation in social and economic problems at that time.

Illicit drug use came to be described as the source of societal decay and was blamed for a plethora of undesirable social ills. Drug use could just as easily have been identified as one of the outcomes of economic and social depravation, but of course this would not have served the purposes of the politicians (Brownstein, 1991). Lapham was eloquently scathing about the American media's compliant role in offering the public an armchair view of the 'drug war', a war which is particularly attractive to politicians because:

...[they] can bravely confront an allegorical enemy rather than an enemy that takes the corporeal form of the tobacco industry, say, or the Chinese, or the oil and banking lobbies. The war against drugs provides them with something to say that offends nobody, requires them to do nothing difficult, and allows them to postpone, perhaps indefinitely, the more urgent and specific questions about the state of the nation's schools, housing [and] employment opportunities for young black men...Like camp followers trudging after an army of crusader knights on its way to Jerusalem, the media have in recent months displayed all the garish colours of the profession (Lapham cited in Fox et al, 1992: 163).

From the 1980s onwards, American media reporting of illicit drugs tended to be alarmist, such as this example from the New York Times:

Crack poses a much greater threat than other drugs. It reaches out to destroy the quality of life, and life itself, at all levels of American society (cited in Brownstein, 1991: 91).

Similar to the US, sensationalist reporting of illicit drug issues has been common in the Australian media over the past two decades. In a study of newspaper reporting in Sydney, Windschuttle found many examples of horror stories designed to titillate the reader and which confirmed the prejudices of the readership:

The heroin sold in Sydney's streets is among the most dangerous in the world. It comes in various forms: Pink Elephants, Chinese Black Rocks, Thai Powder, Penang Poison. But all of it is Asian smoking heroin heavily adulterated ('cut') with strychnine...Pure heroin is practically unobtainable in Sydney. It's cut heavily to increase the profit—strychnine, baby powder, borax, snail killer, concrete dust, Ajax. Anything... (Windschuttle, 1981: 172).<sup>7</sup>

Australia has its share of colourful headlines linking crime, drugs and immigrants, most usually focusing on Asians. For example, 'Vietnamese gangs a big crime threat, says NCA' (*The Age*, 7.9.94); 'Police report predicts rise in Asian Crime' (*The Age*, 10.8.92); 'The Drug Lords who Seised Redfern' (*The Bulletin*, 11.2.97). This last article quoted residents who believed that Vietnamese people were responsible for most of the crime and had a corrupting influence on other groups.

One resident of Redfern is quoted as saying, 'The Vietnamese connection [with Aborigines] is very dangerous—they don't have respect for life and that creates the same sort of attitude in the young Aboriginal boys and girls'. 'Organised crime' and 'gangs' have been terms freely associated with people of Asian background.

In April 1997 journalist Brett Martin reported on:

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<sup>7</sup> In actual fact the adulteration of drugs appears to be rare and when it does occur it is of a relatively benign character. See in the study conducted by Coomber, 1997.

...the growing threat posed in the Pacific and beyond by Asian crime gangs. Chinese Triads, Vietnamese youth gangs, Japanese Yakuza and Korean criminal elements have overtaken Australia's other ethnic groups in the reach and scope of their criminal activity: heroin importation, prostitution, money laundering, extortion, home invasions and other crimes of violence. With the exception of outlaw motorcycle gangs, Caucasians no longer figure large in Australian organised crime (Martin, *The Bulletin*, 8.4.97: 18).

Media hysteria about drugs certainly sells newspapers. However, such reporting is considered dangerous from a number of different perspectives. Drug scares, which blame individual immorality and personal behaviour for endemic social and structural problems, divert attention and resources from the larger, causal problems. When there is no distinction made between people *with* problems, and people *as* problems, there is a tendency to blame the victims of social injustice (Twitchin, 1993).

### **Treatment of Minority Groups in the Media**

In general, people from ethnic backgrounds tend to be invisible in the media. When they do appear it is invariably in stereotypical ways in stories to do with criminal or other conflict situations, or within the context of sport or entertainment. Twitchin found that only about five per cent of television characters in the United Kingdom are black or Asian '...and those that are featured are Asian shopkeepers, black athletes, etc' (Twitchin, 1993: 35). Soo-Lin Quek found that presentation of stories involving ethnic minorities in Australia is always from the perspective and values of white, middle class society (Soo-Lin Quek, 1997).

Some writers have reasoned that the lack of positive stories featuring minorities may be due to a lack of journalist from ethnic minority backgrounds. However, a common complaint of ethnic background journalists was found to be that newsroom policy affects the news selection process, and rigid newsroom policy ensures that those stories that do not fit the traditional news mould are eliminated (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1985). In the absence of news that places ethnic people in many different contexts, mass media stereotypes can be particularly dangerous, giving a false perception of 'others'. Carruthers found that:

...while reporting on Vietnamese in Sydney is rarely overtly racist, the fact that the bulk of the portrayals occurs in the context of 'bad news' creates a net image of Vietnamese as a threat or danger (Carruthers, 1997: 186).

The media often presents crime problems in ways that unduly exaggerate the role of 'new' Australians. This is despite the fact that, 'Research consistently shows that the overseas-born are amongst the most law abiding members of the Australian community' (Grabosky and Wilson, 1989: 130).

Crime among Vietnamese youth has historically been significantly lower than for their non-Vietnamese counterparts, however, media reports give the opposite impression (Soo-Lin Quek, 1997). Kennedy, in the United States, pointed out the

discrepancy between the reality, and the perceptions given by the media, about drug offending:

There exists a striking disjuncture between the racial demographics of actual illicit drug use, which is mainly white in absolute numbers, and the racial demographics of portrayed illicit drug use, which is mainly black (Kennedy, 1997: 381).

In a study of media constructions of heroin and its victims, Elliott found that the motif of the drug problem portrayed in the media in Australia was indeed ethnicised. She found that, particularly in the case of heroin, the drug was labelled as threatening by its association with a minority group – the Vietnamese (Elliott, 1996).

### **Historical Roots of the 'Drug-Asian' Link**

In Australia, reporting of stories about drugs has had a history of anti-Asian sentiment. From his studies of media reports in Melbourne and Sydney in the late 1800s, Manderson found that the opium smoking habit of the Chinese came to be seen as first 'a dirty habit in a dirty people', and then as 'an immoral habit in a hated people' (Manderson, 1993: 24). Chinese were labelled as the demons who corrupted and tricked innocent Anglo-Australians through supply of opium. They were reported as druggers of Anglo women who '...either lost all sexual control or became so heavily drugged that they were unable to resist rape or seduction' (Manderson, 1993: 24).

### **The Pattern Continues**

More modern media creation of illicit drug 'reality' is startlingly similar to that of the late 1800s media creations. Elliott found that a recurrent theme in modern media reports about illicit drugs was the characterisation and representation of the 'evil supplier' of heroin as 'ethnic', and the user as a 'victim'. Windschuttle also found that the media tended to emphasise 'the pushers' in a stereotyped arch-villain characterisation, in the business of corrupting the innocent and unworldly user (Windschuttle, 1981: 173).

The media characterisation of heroin traffickers consistently provided images of undifferentiated criminality and moral culpability... (Elliott, 1996: 67).

O'Donnell noted that in contrast, the drug user is almost always portrayed as a victim who is not responsible for their own actions and deserves sympathy (O'Donnell, 1990).

Elliott found many examples of the 'evil Asian dealer versus the innocent Anglo user' motif in media reporting of drugs in the *Herald Sun* and *The Age* newspapers from September 1995 to the end of April 1996:

Police concern that Asian crime gangs are using schoolchildren to traffic heroin in Melbourne's western suburbs must alarm all parents (*Herald Sun*, 29.11.95: 12).

Police believe the heroin glut coincides with a push by established Sydney gangs into Melbourne...the gangs are predominantly made up of youths of Vietnamese origin (*The Age* 15.10.95: 7).

Many of the users are Australian, Chief Superintendent Ritchie said, but people working in the gangs are Vietnamese... (*Herald Sun*, 28.11.95: 1).

The casualties of the states' emerging heroin epidemic had sudden, lonely and agonising deaths (*Herald Sun*, 23.4.96: 41).

Other articles reported the violence and weapons used by drug dealers who, by association with other articles, are implied to be Asian dealers, to further impress the public with an image of the Asian drug dealer as evil:

Military style automatic weapons have been thrown on to the streets of Footscray from cars being pursued by police divisional vans, Chief inspector McKoy said. (*Herald Sun*, 29.11.95: 5).

Elliot found that at times there was an implicit assumption that heroin trafficking was a major problem amongst non-permanent residents of Australia:

...if they deal in smack, send em back. The White Australian Resistance group has dropped leaflets at houses in Melbourne's north-west stating the recent outbreak of western suburbs drug dealing had exposed the ethnic-based origins of the epidemic (*Herald Sun*, 12.2.96: 11).

The State Opposition has called for deportation of non-resident immigrants charged with drug offences, in a bid to stem Melbourne's growing heroin trade (*Herald Sun*, 30.11.95: 4).

Other throwaway lines singling out particular ethnic groups were common:

The boy was photographed in Caroline Lane, Redfern, an inner-Sydney suburb notorious for its high proportion of Aboriginal residents who are addicted to heroin. Sydney's other heroin-riddled suburb is Cabramatta, where most of the addicts are Vietnamese and Lebanese (Overington, 1999: 3).

Melbourne academics were of the view that local newspapers do give a disproportionate coverage of Vietnamese involvement in illicit drugs:

...The *Herald Sun* in particular has clearly been running what could be considered to be a vendetta against the Vietnamese in Victoria, and *The Age* has not been far behind. It is a form of selectivity and a form of exaggeration coverage. Almost all the photos accompanying stories of drugs show Asians. There have been some examples of quite unconscionable behaviour by the *Herald Sun* (Academic key informant, 1999).

More recently, a crime statistics expert described media reports this way:

I think the media is biased because it is incomplete. They go far enough to identify the ethnic group involved in the crime but not to explain it. Therefore we are left with the perception that there is some racial tendency to offend, rather than that certain ethnic groups are involved in crime because they have a lack of opportunities just as Anglo-Saxons will engage in crime for the same reasons (Crime statistics key informant, 1999).

The editorial of the *Herald Sun* on 29.11.95 justified the use of racist language and the singling out of a specific ethnic group in this way:

There will be inevitable complaints that one or another ethnic group is singled out. But if the way to stop the trade is to acquire an understanding of the undercurrents operating in a minority of people among the various nationalities now in Australia, so be it. The threat heroin poses to our children transcends the niceties of political correctness (cited in Rodd and Leber, 1996: 90).

Criminal intelligence personnel, however, appear not to share the media's view of the nature of drug offending:

Media coverage is not at all accurate. The focus on Vietnamese is a beat up and they are convenient scapegoats. Of course there are Vietnamese involved in street level dealing but that is the bottom level. One of the most successful drug syndicates ever in Australia was the Mr Asia drug syndicate and it was comprised of New Zealanders with one or two Australians. You do not have to be Chinese or from South East Asia to smuggle significant amounts of heroin into Australia and it wouldn't surprise me if there were other Mr Asia syndicates in existence. However, these types of syndicates do not feed people's prejudices and they don't sell newspapers (Criminal intelligence key informant, 1999).

## The Media's Construction of the Vietnamese-Australian

From the start...Vietnamese-Australians have presented the media with an interesting paradox...a mix of compassion for a dispossessed people who had undergone trauma, and overt racism as the old fear of an Asian invasion was once again raised...in the late 1980s, social categories have started to be reformed...All this makes the Vietnamese ideal subjects for media stories. As a group they have become newsworthy in their own right...over and above any specific issue or event in which [they] may have been involved (Twitchin, 1993: 30).

In her examination of articles in *The Age* and *Herald Sun*, Soo-Lin Quek found that Vietnamese youth were disproportionately represented as belonging to deviant, gang-related action. She found examples of the media making quantum leaps from seeing groups of Vietnamese young people to assuming they must be members of a gang:

In both newspaper stories there is a leap from incidents of violence to reports on the existence of 'gangs' of Vietnamese young people. Vietnamese young people are tarred with the one and only brush. Based on assumptions of the 'other' as criminal and a threat, a group of Vietnamese young people 'hanging out' together in public, who may have no intentions of breaking the law, become suspect in the eyes of many, and are viewed with suspicion and an element of fear by the 'ordinary, law-abiding' citizens (Soo-Lin Quek, 1997: 180).

From 1994–1996, Footscray and other inner western suburbs of Melbourne became the focus of considerable media attention over 'youth violence', 'youth drug dealing' and 'Asian gangs'. According to Rodd and Leber, Vietnamese young people were targeted as the culprits, with the media tapping into '...two of the wider community's underlying fears and prejudices: their suspicion of young people and their fear of difference' (Rodd and Leber, 1996: 83). The result of the sensationalist, simplistic style of reporting by the media was considered to be far reaching and divisive for Vietnamese young people and the wider Vietnamese community who were left '...stunned, particularly Vietnamese young people. The representations they saw in the media were far from the reality they lived' (Rodd and Leber, 1996: 83).

Only one article out of 80 examined gave a voice to Vietnamese young people. In this article a young Vietnamese soccer player is quoted as saying:

People think we are bullies because of what they read in the newspapers. They think we are a Vietnamese gang and carry knives. When we finish the game in Richmond we sat together, about 15 of us, and talked about the game.

You can see people are afraid to sit near you. People said, 'That's a gang.' It's not a gang, it's a soccer team (*Sunshine Advocate*, 2.3.94, cited in Rodd and Leber, 1996: 93).

One example of the grossly simplistic and biased reporting found by Rodd and Leber was an article that quoted police arrest statistics showing the arrest rate for Vietnamese people as the highest. The article's aim was to set up a seemingly objective set of 'facts' with the assumption that 'figures don't lie'. Rodd and Leber point out that the figures in fact did not represent guilty people and also do not reflect the *number* of individuals involved. This however, did not stop the *Herald Sun* from suggesting there was a high level of criminality among the Vietnamese community. In addition, and not insignificantly, the figures on which the article was based came from the Asian Squad, where it would be expected that (as Asian people are their focus) their figures should reflect this.

In 1996, even academic spokespeople were beginning to mirror the journalists' slant on drugs during the period 1994-96:

In their quest for identity, young Vietnamese band together, define what they see as their territory, then set about controlling and defending it, leading to gang wars on the street...they have had to buy their way into traditional Australian suburbs, in some cases...taking them over. This has led to resentment from locals... (Wilson, 1996, 19).

Rodd and Leber found that the negative media portrayals of the Vietnamese have led to the Vietnamese community's desire for invisibility and their withdrawal from participation in public life. In their interviews with Vietnamese people Rodd and Leber found young people were sad, shocked and angry that they were not seen as individuals, and were concerned about the impact such styles of reporting would have on their ability to get jobs (Rodd and Leber, 1996).

## **Number of Media Articles: Ethnicity and Drugs**

The present authors examined and electronically searched newspaper articles from the *Herald Sun* and *The Age* (stored on CD-ROM). A word search of articles was undertaken for the years 1998, 1997, 1996 and 1992-93, to establish how many articles contained certain key words. From a brief scan of the content of the articles that contained the word 'drug', it appeared that most articles related to illicit drugs. However, when viewing Table 1 it does need to be borne in mind that articles might also relate to drugs in sport, legal drugs, and drugs in countries other than Australia. Thus, caution needs to be adopted when interpreting the figures reported below. One category that was deleted from our count was 'drug/China', because the bulk of these articles related to performance-enhancing drugs used by Chinese athletes.

Bearing in mind the limitations of the data, the table below shows that the number of articles on 'drugs' appeared to peak in 1997 and fall off quite suddenly in 1998. Over the four different years examined, the *Herald Sun* consistently ran more drug stories than did *The Age*. In 1992–93 the number of stories about drugs appearing in the *Herald Sun* was more than double that of *The Age*. In 1996 and 1997 the number of stories about drugs in *The Age* appeared to approach the number in the *Herald Sun*. However, in 1998 the number of drug stories in the *Herald Sun*, although fewer than previous years, again doubled that of *The Age*.

**Table 1 Number of articles appearing in *The Age* and the *Herald Sun* newspapers which contain combination key words, over four years**

Key words	1998 (up to August)		1997		1996		1992–93	
	The Age	Herald Sun	The Age	Herald Sun	The Age	Herald Sun	The Age	Herald Sun
Drug	1,279	2,567	3,045	3,369	2,973	3,472	1,928	4,635
Drug/Australia	41	53	41	128	39	85	15	22
Drug/Ethnic	29	28	43	38	60	34	37	33
Drug/Asian	76	88	111	91	105	103	54	74
Drug/Vietnam	52	44	115	34	52	28	41	18
Drug/Turkey	9	0	13	4	0	3	1	2
Drug/Somali/ Eritrean/Horn	2	0	4	0	1	0	0	0
Drug/Timor	6	0	8	0	0	1	0	0
Drug/Italian	65	88	119	86	93	68	74	184
Drug/Greek	31	29	66	35	41	32	28	41
Drug/Lebanese	9	4	13	7	10	5	3	2
Drug/Romanian	3	8	8	6	11	11	8	13
Drug/Russian	45	43	100	73	81	85	54	117

The number of articles that included the word combination 'drug' and 'Asian' were similar in number for both newspapers. However, in each of the four years examined, *The Age* consistently had more articles that contained the combination of 'drug' and 'Vietnam'. Articles which included the combinations: 'drug' and 'Italian'; and 'drug' and 'Russian' were relatively frequent in both newspapers, and to a lesser extent the combination 'drug' and 'Greek'.

### **Less Sensationalist, More Balanced Reporting?**

There is strong pressure on journalists to ensure that their reporting content and style will attract the most viewers or readers, and thus the greatest audience for its paying advertisers (Simpson, 1997). Sensationalist stories (in which, arguably, the facts are often sacrificed for a good story) are therefore the 'bread and butter' of journalists. Nevertheless, there appears to have been a recent move away from sensationalism in relation to media reporting of illicit drug issues, with a move towards articles concerned with how the problem should best be tackled. The discussion of possible responses appears to encompass a broader range of views than previously seen in newspaper reports and is less dominated by the traditional supply-reduction approach. One example of this was the articles and reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which followed the above-mentioned sensationalist needle syringe story about the allegedly 12 year old boy injecting heroin. Most of the subsequent articles were concerned with health workers' calls for radical changes to government's drug policy, including the need for safe injecting rooms and controlled heroin trials. They also called for more detoxification, treatment and rehabilitation centres, especially for young drug users. The ethnic focus too appears to have receded.

The Australian Drug Council (ADCA) monitoring of the media shows that, although there is still the occasional sensationalist story, there has indeed been an observable change in the nature of the coverage. What has prompted this change is not clear, but the reasons are probably complex. Perhaps they are connected to the media's reading of the attitude of politicians, police and the public.

### **Ethnic Media Coverage of Drug Issues**

Even for people of non-English speaking background who are proficient in English, ethnic newspapers tend to be a more important source of information on community welfare services than mainstream English language newspapers (Scott, 1980: 16). In a study conducted by the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research it was found that 68 per cent of ethnic people listened to SBS radio and 60 per cent of SBS listeners wanted to hear more information on government services (Bureau of Immigration and Population Research). There are many other radio stations that provide programs in languages other than English:

...radio is by far the best medium in which to access the ethnic community in a language other than English...it is the most broad reaching medium and is perhaps the best value for money (Eyles and Xsateroulis, 1995: 23).

The following information relating to ethnic media has come from NESB people who participated in the ethnic community consultation phase of the Turning the Tide project, *Drugs in a Multicultural Community*. This project was conducted by the Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research and the North Richmond Community Health Centre on behalf of the Department of Human Services, Melbourne in 1999.

### **Greek Media**

The Greek media usually reflect the mainstream media's way of reporting drug issues. They will take main articles from *The Age* and have them translated into Greek and the translations are fairly accurate. In Greek papers reporting is very simplistic and biased, and singles out certain ethnic groups to blame for the drug problem. Greek newspapers present drug issues stories as though drugs are a problem for others and not for Greek people. They also report on general health issues but these rarely concern the drug problem.

Many Greek people listen to the Greek language radio. However, while mainstream talkback radio attracts people who ring in about their son or daughter on drugs, 'I don't think this would happen if the parents were Greek, they are just not so outspoken' (Greek community consultant).

### **Italian Media**

Drug stories and issues are rarely presented in the Italian media, and are certainly not reported on as much as in the general media. The general media is very biased in the way that it blames certain ethnic groups – even among the Italian community. Italian language radio could help disseminate information to people who find it difficult to find out about drug issues.

### **Turkish Media**

Turkish language newspapers reflect the mainstream papers and never treat the drug problem in any depth. 'The Turkish papers will pick up drugs as an issue and then they will drop it' (Turkish community consultant).

### **Lebanese Media**

In the Lebanese papers the only time the drug issue is dealt with is when there is a crisis, or when a Lebanese person who has experience in illicit drugs comes to Australia. The Lebanese papers will report on the visit. Very occasionally, Lebanese

papers will translate a mainstream report on illicit drugs, but there is no debate or discussion about drugs in the Lebanese papers.

Arabic papers would never address the issue of drugs in a way that suggested drugs was an issue for the Lebanese or Arabic speaking community. If the media do a report on drugs it is about *others* using drugs, or drugs in general:

The papers try to hide the problem and not mention drugs. None of the reporters are professional journalists. They start off making Lebanese bread and then they graduate and become a journalist. They think that if they discuss drugs then they are advertising for drugs. That is their mentality. Can you imagine an Arabic speaker discussing drugs problems on the radio? You have Buckley's hope (Lebanese community consultant).

### **Vietnamese Media**

Vietnamese papers often translate general news from the mainstream media, but the meaning is often different, and not translated appropriately. Articles on drugs are sometimes not as originally reported in the mainstream papers. Often the Vietnamese newspapers will try to inject some information or education into their articles on drugs:

The mainstream media are biased in their reporting. This has caused enormous distress and problems for Vietnamese people. People feel really stigmatised. People feel embarrassed and labelled as being responsible for all the drug problems in Australia. Vietnamese people are now very sensitive to what is said about the drug problem and they read things into reports even when there may be no intention to slur Vietnamese (Vietnamese consultation participant).

### **Somali Media**

There is Somali radio on a Friday, however all that is broadcast is news from the BBC.

### **Eritrean Media**

There is no Eritrean newspaper or radio. There is a newsletter circulated within the Eritrean community, however, to date it has not contained any articles on illicit drugs. A report of the issues raised in the face-to-face meeting with researchers from Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research was the first article on illicit drug issues published in the newsletter, July 1999. Face-to-face and verbal explanation of any written material submitted for inclusion in the newsletter is essential, both from a cultural point of view and from the point of view of accurate interpretation and explanation of the subject in the Eritrean language.

## **Timorese Media**

There is no Timorese newspaper. Some Timorese read a Portuguese newspaper but there is nothing about drug issues reported in that paper. There is a Timorese radio station. However, this station never mentions drug issues:

Radio could be a good forum for giving out information about drugs, either in Chinese or in Hakka language, but it would largely depend on the reputation of the presenter as to how well the information would be received. The Timorese community has little understanding of what is reported in the general media about the issues of drugs (Timorese community consultant).

Although a Timorese newsletter does report on some drug issues, it is only distributed to members of the Timorese Association – not to all Timorese.