MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE DRUG CRISIS

A REPORT FROM THE FORUM HELD ON APRIL 1, 1992
AT THE ANNENBERG WASHINGTON PROGRAM

BY DAVID MCKEAN

THE ANNENBERG
WASHINGTON PROGRAM
Communications Policy Studies
Northwestern University

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The Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University provides a neutral forum, open to diverse opinion, for assessing the impact of communications technologies and public policies. The Program serves as a bridge between policymakers, industry officials, academics, the press and the public. The Program, now in its ninth year, is directed by Newton N. Minow, a former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission.

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The author would like to thank Kathryn Edmundson for her assistance in organizing the conference on which the report is based.

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CONTENTS

"When Newt Minow asked me, I think it was over a year ago, to take part in this conference, I immediately accepted because the subject that brings us together is one that has been a preoccupation of mine for a long time.

As a matter of fact, it was in 1969 that I opened hearings in the subcommittee I then chaired in the House of Representatives on the Drug Abuse Education bill and expressed the hope that President Nixon would sign it into law. We passed it. He did sign it into law, albeit reluctantly, and it was expanded four years later to include alcohol. Congress really never put much money into it and then, in 1981, the program was effectively terminated. So we are still working very hard on the problem of drug abuse. Most recently, I have been involved as chairman of Fighting Back, a program sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

What brings us here today, however, is a first effort at asking questions, not about how to fight drugs and drug abuse but how the media covers the issue of drug abuse. The key question we consider therefore is not whether Federal drug policy is right or wrong, but rather, at the national and local levels, how is the issue of drug abuse defined by the media? What impact do the media have? What role should the media take in helping the Nation and its communities find solutions to this terribly difficult problem?"

JOHN BRADEMAS
President Emeritus
New York University
at the April 1992 Annenberg Forum

INTRODUCTION

Drug abuse is arguably the single most important domestic problem facing the American people today. The use of illegal drugs negatively affects society in many different ways, ranging from increased crime to the spread of AIDS to the loss of economic productivity. Yet the media appear to have lost interest in covering the story of America's addiction problem. This phenomenon, and the reasons behind it, were among the issues explored at The Annenberg Washington Program's recent half-day forum on "Media Coverage of the Drug Crisis."

The April forum brought together distinguished experts from media, government and private foundations to assess national media coverage of the drug issue and to discuss the impact of local coverage of drug abuse. Convened by Dr. John Brademas, President Emeritus of New York University, and Newton N. Minow, Director of The Annenberg Washington Program, the forum followed on The Annenberg Washington Program's 1991 policy memorandum to former Governor Bob Martinez, the Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. This memorandum, entitled, "The Tenth Strategy: Communications and the Fight for a Drug-Free America," urged the Director to better

integrate communications into the federal drug strategy.

Obviously, drug abuse in the United States is an extremely complicated problem that will require a concerted effort on a number of fronts. But as Newton Minow said in his introductory remarks to forum participants, "The power of the media in shaping attitudes is immense." The objective of the April forum was to exchange ideas on how the media could play a more positive role in examining the drug problem on the national and local levels.

DEFINING CRISIS

One of the difficulties facing media coverage of the "war on drugs" is assessing the degree to which drug abuse is or is not a crisis, an issue further complicated by the role of the media in identifying or creating crises. As Jeff Levine, medical correspondent for CNN, stated, "Our perception of what constitutes a crisis is largely formed by...[the media]...." The media are rightly concerned about "hyping" an issue, not only because it diminishes their credibility, but also because their treatment of an issue can have tremendous impact on the public. For instance, Donald Wesson, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at San Francisco University, has said that "if the media says it's an epidemic, drug adventurers say everybody's using it so I've got to try it."[1] However, the problem is equally exacerbated if news organizations fail to sound the alarm.

More than a decade after President Reagan first declared war on drugs, there is some concern that the media have exaggerated the problem of drug abuse. In a speech to forum participants, Congressman Michael Oxley of Ohio criticized the media for calling the problem "a drug epidemic." Congressman Oxley believes that the word "epidemic" connotes a medical catastrophe and fails to take into account such crucial factors as "personal responsibility." On the other hand, Judge Reggie Walton of the District of Columbia Superior Court, a former Deputy Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, described drug abuse as "an epidemic that is strangling this country." Crisis or epidemic, drug abuse in the United States has reached critical proportions; forum participants provided a litany of wrenching statistics:

- One of every 15 babies is born addicted to drugs or to alcohol.
- Substance abuse counts directly and indirectly for more than 25% of all medical care costs in the country.
- More than 50% of the domestic violence in the country is associated with drug abuse.
- Drug users are involved in 10%-15% of our highway fatalities.

More graphic than the statistics are the personal stories of those who deal with the problem on a daily basis. Again, forum participants offered testimony to the severity of the drug problem:

- Ron Gardner, a reporter and anchor for Channel Five Fox News in Washington, D.C., and the host of "City Under Siege," a television program that covered Washington's war on drugs during 1989 and 1990,

admitted that he was "shocked" and "scared to death" by what he had seen as he reported on the prevalence of drugs in the nation's capital. According to Gardner, "It took me a while to understand that there was a whole generation or maybe a couple of generations of young people here who honestly do not seem to care whether they live to see the sun rise tomorrow or not."

- Judge Walton took a two-year sabbatical from the District of Columbia Superior Court to serve as the Associate Director for the Office of National Drug Control Policy. When he returned to the bench, he found that his case load had doubled; 85% of the cases he now hears are "drug-related."

- Frankie Sarver, a social worker who is presently the Executive Director of "Fighting Back" in Little Rock, Arkansas, has been on the front lines of the drug war for over a decade. Her discussion of drug-related crime in Arkansas highlighted the relationship of drug abuse to rape: Arkansas leads the nation in reported rapes; and in 70% of these cases, "the perpetrators were under the influence of alcohol and other drugs." She also noted that the number of teenage pregnancies in Arkansas is among the highest in the nation and that 60% of "those young girls were under the influence of alcohol and other drugs when they first experimented with sex."

DIMINISHED NATIONAL COVERAGE

Though the problems associated with drug abuse have become more acute, national media coverage of the drug issue has slackened. Andrew Tyndall, publisher of the *Tyndall Report*, noted that coverage of the drug issue peaked in 1989, after President Bush delivered a major domestic policy address on the drug crisis. The fact that this speech was the President's first major domestic policy address and followed the drug-related violence which had erupted in Colombia only weeks before helped to focus media attention on the issue. Tyndall, who monitors the weekday nightly newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC, reported that during the 56 months from 1988 to the present, drugs have attracted at least one hour of monthly coverage 10 times—but not once since June 1990.

There are several reasons for this decline in media coverage of the drug crisis. First, in recent years, there has not been a single startling, drug-related event that has catapulted the drug issue to the front page and captured the imagination of the public. Congressman Charles Rangel, keynote speaker at the forum, expressed his hope that the country wouldn't need the death of another black basketball player to make people "get involved and ask, 'Where are we going?'" (It was the sudden death of college basketball star Len Bias in 1985 that propelled the issue of drug abuse into the category of major story at that time.) Recently, the revelation of another basketball star, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, served in similar fashion to raise the American public's awareness and understanding of the AIDS crisis.

Second, the media have not covered the problem of drug abuse so extensively as before because drugs have lost standing as a political issue. Polling data show that in 1988, the American public viewed drugs as the number one problem confronting the country; by 1992, drugs barely made the list of the 10 most critical issues. According to Tyndall, "Four years ago, drugs was a hot issue in the election campaign, and it's absent now. Politicians don't think there are votes in drugs now." Tyndall argued that the focus on drugs in 1988 was the work of Democratic presidential candidate Jesse Jackson who skillfully used the issue for "tactical advantage." Unfortunately, it is improbable that drugs will be an important issue of debate during the 1992 election because none of the candidates perceives the issue as an opportunity for political gain.

Third, coverage of drug abuse has declined because the public is confused about the seriousness of the problem. Benjamin Banta, Press Secretary to Director Martinez, implied that news coverage of the drug crisis has diminished because the public now believes that the problem is being addressed. Though Judge Walton concurred with Banta's assessment of public opinion, he argued that the public has been misled and criticized the media for contributing to the "misperception...that we are out of the woods, and therefore, we're home free. We're not."

Perhaps the most important reason for the public's waning interest in the drug crisis is the nation's sluggish economy which, at least for now, has a more direct impact on most people's lives than drug abuse. Viewed from this perspective, the problem of drug abuse has not disappeared; it has merely been supplanted by more immediate concerns. Therefore, Congressman Rangel suggested to the forum that the most effective way to fight the "war on drugs" might be to recast the crisis in economic terms for both the Administration and the American public: When everyone understands the loss of productivity as an effect of drug abuse, public concern will increase, and more resources will be devoted to curbing drug abuse.

RACE, DRUGS AND THE MEDIA

The principal concern expressed by forum participants about media coverage of drug issues was that the media, particularly the electronic media, have cast the drug problem along racial lines. Frankie Sarver accused the media of failing to confront racism, which she charged is "likely the number one barrier to...any significant progress in fighting this problem." Judge Walton maintained that by portraying the drug crisis as "primarily a problem of poor people and minorities, blacks and hispanics," the media have performed "a great disservice...," adding that "nothing could be further from the truth. [I]f you talk about pure economics—the inner-city, poor community could not support the amount of money needed to fuel the drug economy."

Market research and trend analysis tend to support Judge Walton's concerns about media coverage. An October 1990 trend analysis report by *Media Monitor* examined the racial distribution of individuals shown in contexts associated with drug use on television news. The *Monitor's* sample consisted of 1,336 visuals (camera shots) depicting the human side of the domestic problem, including shots of neighborhoods and alleged crack houses where

drug sales and use were believed to be prevalent. According to the *Monitor*, "In such contexts, blacks were visually associated with drugs more frequently than were whites." In half of the sample visuals, only non-whites were shown, most of whom were black. Another 17% of the visuals showed a mixture of whites and non-whites. Only 32% of the drug-related visuals showed only whites."

However, the actual racial composition of those who abuse drugs is far more complex. For example, Director Bennett acknowledged before leaving the Office of National Drug Control Policy that the vast majority of those who abuse drugs are white; and a 1991 survey by the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA) supports Bennett's assertion. The NIDA study showed that 50% of current users of crack are white; 58% of the current users of cocaine are white; and among users of all illegal drugs, 72% are white, 17% are black and 8% are Hispanic.

The point reiterated by many at the forum—and reinforced by the NIDA study—was that drug abuse is a national problem that cuts across social, racial and economic lines. It affects everyone, and until the media can drive that point home, the public's tendency to view drug abuse as "someone else's problem"—an attitude encouraging political inertia—will persist.

THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT AS A MEDIA STAGE

In addition, the drug problem is not limited to the inner cities, as media coverage seems to imply. Drugs are readily available in the suburbs, even—as the Senate Judiciary Committee reported in 1991—in "an unexpected area: rural America," where "drug use has continued to spiral upward."[2] Some critics impute this narrow view of the drug issue to political leadership. For example, Ralph Brauer, writing in *The Nation*, lamented, "The Bush Administration is targeting not merely dealers but addicts and those who happen to have the misfortune of living near a crack house but take no action against it. The President tells a national audience that blame for the drug crisis lies with everyone who sells drugs and everyone who looks the other way." According to Brauer, "This leads to a rather loose definition of enemy territory: crack dealers become crack neighborhoods become the inner city."[3]

But the fault lies as much with the media as with the President. According to Tyndall, "[T]he networks took the opportunity—took the label drugs—and made that the peg on which they could go in and do their reports on what life is like in the inner city: the real despair, the real poverty, the real hopelessness....And they called those drug stories." Judge Walton was highly skeptical of this approach: "It's easier to go out on the street and see young black men standing on the corner selling drugs. It's somewhat more difficult to go on a college campus, and go into a dormitory room, and see college kids using drugs; or go over to Georgetown and get into the inner circles of a club...and depict through the media what is taking place."

DRUG ABUSE: A COMPLEX ISSUE

The greatest failing of the media in covering the problem of drug abuse may be their oversimplification—even trivialization—of this

very serious and complex problem. Congressman Oxley found that the media have too often focused on irrelevant aspects of the drug issue: he cited the media's fascination with former Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, William Bennett's smoking, and Governor Bill Clinton's use of marijuana when he was a student, and argued that in each case, the media were apparently more interested in launching a personal attack on a public official than in covering the drug war. In fact, in the story he had read about Governor Clinton, he hadn't seen "one word in the entire article about what Clinton's drug policy would be if he were elected President of the United States."

Congressman Oxley also criticized the media for their apparent inability to understand and accurately report the conceptual framework of the federal drug strategy. Tyndall concurred, noting that in 1989, "President Bush had minimal success in getting his program covered seriously" because the press was more interested in "the glamorous, sexy, exciting facets of the war on drugs...coverage of street gangs, coverage of cocaine babies and coverage of the violence in Colombia."

Although the President's strategy, focused on law enforcement and the casual user, has not been successful, it deserves coverage nevertheless, because it can help the American people to measure and assess the government's progress in fighting drug abuse. At present, however, it appears that both national newscasts and national newspaper reporting suffer from minimal resources and, more disturbingly, a lack of commitment to fully cover drug abuse and the efforts to combat it.

ENLISTING THE MEDIA IN THE WAR ON DRUGS

Several suggestions were offered during the forum for improving media coverage of the drug issue. David Rosenbloom, Project Director of Join Together at Boston University's School of Public Health, suggested that if the United States were really fighting a war on drugs, the press should be designating "war correspondents" to cover it. Obviously, this is not happening at the national level; the only full-time correspondent covering the drug crisis for a national network, Lisa Meyers of NBC, has now shifted to covering national politics.

On the local level, however, there have been more concerted efforts to cover the drug war. For instance, in Washington, D.C., Channel Five Fox News began in January 1989 to devote an entire half-hour of late night news to coverage of the drug war. The show, "City Under Siege," anchored by forum participant Ron Gardner, ran for 18 months. Gardner said that its ratings were consistently high and that the show had successfully competed against other news programs in the same time slot.

In many ways, Gardner was the nation's first "drug war correspondent;" and in a compelling and powerful personal statement, he discussed how the show had affected him—after a year of seeing the terrible human costs of the drug crisis, he asked to be transferred from the program. He believes that the show exerted a significant effect on the community and cited the emergence of a number of grass-roots, anti-drug organizations during the show's life-span.

FIGHTING BACK ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

"City Under Siege" represented an extraordinary commitment on the part of local television, but the effort ultimately failed when management decided to transfer the resources devoted to it to a new morning news show. In an era of limited resources for all news organizations, a more practical approach for networks and newspapers committed to in-depth coverage of the problem of drug abuse has been employed by WKEY-TV, a Santa Barbara news station, which has joined forces with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's program "Fighting Back."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, currently the fifth largest national foundation in the United States, is the sponsor of "Fighting Back," a $27 million program to encourage comprehensive community-wide efforts to reduce the demand for illegal drugs and alcohol. The program analyzes each community individually and crafts an approach, which includes the media, to address the community's own drug crisis. Thirteen communities, ranging from the urban inner city of Washington, D.C. to three counties in rural New Mexico, are recipients of grants which will total as much as $3 million for each community over the next five years.

Sandra Benton, Vice President and General Manager of WKEY-TV, explained why she had committed the station to the reduction of drug and alcohol abuse through the "Fighting Back" program. In Santa Barbara, a wealthy seaside resort, the problem was "denial." Through a series of public service announcements and news reports that demonstrated the magnitude of the drug abuse problem in Santa Barbara, the station was able to make a significant contribution towards helping the community deal with its problem. As Rosenbloom observed, in cities such as Santa Barbara the media "are not just reporting, as if they were outside observers, but participating...in developing and implementing" coalitions and strategies for dealing with community drug abuse.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING COVERAGE OF THE DRUG CRISIS

There are several ways in which the media can improve coverage of drug abuse. First, more extensive coverage is needed and might be forthcoming if there were stronger national leadership from both the Congress and the Administration. John Brademas, moderator of the forum and former majority whip of the House of Representatives, noted that he had held hearings 23 years ago on the "threat that drugs posed to our society" and lamented the fact that many of the same battles are still being fought. Gardner echoed his frustration: "I still hear politicians saying the exact same things today...that were being said four years ago." Though national leadership will not ensure accurate or responsible coverage of the issue, it may generate more coverage which is sorely needed if the American public is truly to understand the scope and impact of the problem.

Secondly, the media needs to personalize the problem of drug abuse for every American. As Jeff Levine puts it, the media should focus on "the human face of the story." Levine believes that "viewers are not as interested in news conferences and the wit and wisdom of

newsmakers nearly as much as they are in human stories that present things in a realistic light." Judge Walton agreed with Levine that the media should portray the drug problem as a "problem that has the potential of impacting everyone in American society."

Thirdly, the media should show more distinctly the corruption behind the drug trade and what that corruption is doing to our society. For example, one of the issues that Judge Walton would like to see covered more intensively is the fact that the American court system is being "overwhelmed by the drug crisis," to the extent that the courts "are not able to perform the function that constitutionally and statutorily [they] were created to do." This goes far beyond the typical drug bust and drug-related killings stories and will require significant investigative reporting. Another area that demands serious investigative reporting is the financial corruption associated with the drug trade; drug dealers cannot do business without financial institutions to launder their money.

Finally, the media must offer hope that the problem can be successfully addressed. Rosenbloom suggested that "there is an ongoing story to be told about how sometimes public policy changes work....And maybe if we paid attention to some of these public policy issues, and reported their consequences over time and in a regular way, we could generate additional support for more public policy changes that might be effective." At least one television network, NBC, has already adopted Rosenbloom's concept with such weekly segments as "What Works" and "Daily Difference." Perhaps the other networks and national newspapers and magazines might consider adopting similar segments devoted solely to the drug crisis.

FUTURE ANALYSIS ON THE MEDIA AND DRUGS

There is great opportunity for additional work in this area. News organizations are focusing increasingly on the abuse of legitimate drugs. Tyndall noted that "as [network coverage of] drugs go[es] down, proportionally," there is "an increase in the [coverage] of alcohol and tobacco" abuse. Levine agreed, pointing out that "tobacco...is killing an estimated 435,000 people a year." A future forum might examine the mixed messages about drug abuse which the media, and particularly the advertising industry, deliver to our society.

The Annenberg Washington Program's April forum focused on the content of news coverage of the drug crisis, but the media obviously consist of more than news organizations. A future forum might focus on how other media components like television and motion pictures are addressing the drug crisis. Clearly, for example, the drug culture is not glamorized to the extent it once was by television shows like "Miami Vice."

OBLIGATIONS OF THE MEDIA

Several participants in the forum predicted a bleak future for the United States if the drug problem is not addressed in a more meaningful fashion. Pat Murphy, Director of the Police Policy Board for the U.S. Conference of Mayors, confirmed that "[drug] traffic and the profits in it are causing...terrible violence in

the inner cities, which is beginning to worry police chiefs that we may be coming to another round of inner-city outbursts that goes beyond individual violence." Judge Walton feared that the violence that terrorized the nation of Colombia would be repeated in this country. He warned that drug traffickers would soon start "going after prosecutors and...judges."

Although the epidemic of drug abuse threatens our democratic institutions, the American public is apparently convinced that drugs are far less important than many other social problems. If this is to change, the media must play a far more active role in educating the public. On the national level, a renewed commitment to aggressive coverage of the drug crisis in all its manifestations is desperately needed, though more coverage will not be enough. Content is vitally important, and many of the participants' suggestions—greater sensitivity to race, more stories about individuals and drugs, more investigative reporting and more emphasis on effective strategies—will greatly improve the quality of reporting on the problem of drug abuse.

On the local level, where the country's hope for victory in this crisis must ultimately lie, the media must adopt activist roles through news stories and public service announcements addressed to the specific needs of the community. The efforts of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation offer real promise in this area.

Joe Tarrer, a veteran newsperson and publisher of the *Santa Barbara News-Press*, summed it up best when he said, "I would be abusing my responsibility and the responsibility of my position not to participate in this issue, which is so important to my neighbors. Some in my profession would argue that the [media's] role is to only report the happenings of the community, and not get involved. I disagree...[the media] can point a finger or [the media] can point the way."

ENDNOTES

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3. Ralph Brauer, "The Drug War of Words," *The Nation*, May 20, 1990, p. 705.

Media Coverage of the Drug Crisis
April 1, 1992

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