

## The Media Portrayal of Cannabis in Relation to Criminal Activities



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**BACKGROUND:** Analysis of the content of media messages, as an integral part of discourse analysis, is also used to identify predominant stories which shape public opinion about drug policy and substance use, influence the drug policy. **AIMS:** To find out about the media portrayal of cannabis and alcohol in relation to criminal activities. To point out stories and narrative constructions of social reality which predominate in media coverage but do not correspond to the objective risks. **METHODS:** Content analysis of media messages was selected as a method which made it possible to carry out systematic research into a great deal of media coverage. In order to conduct statistical analysis, it was necessary to encode the relevant messages using a system of operationalised variables. The original Manual for Coding of Media Messages, the development and testing of which were the main tasks of the project under implementation, was used for this purpose. This approach is generally based on the principle of the quantification of qualitative data using the scaling method. The rate of occurrence of the relevant variables under observation and their mutual relationships were looked for. **SAMPLE:** A total of 8,691 items presented

by the Czech media in relation to the drug issue (including 5,317 printed articles, 1,910 messages provided by news agencies, and 1,021 and 443 items of television and radio coverage respectively) were encoded into the database in 2007. **RESULTS:** The media associate the use of cannabis with criminal activities to a greater degree than is the case with alcohol use. This difference mainly results from primary drug-related crime. The media do not sufficiently highlight the social risks related to alcohol use. In the media coverage of these risks, each of the addictive substances under consideration is associated with a different target group in the population, and, as far as cannabis is concerned, it is often the case that no target groups are distinguished. The media coverage of cannabis mostly features news items whose subject matter involves measures aimed at the reduction of supply, rather than demand. **CONCLUSIONS:** The media are involved in the constitution of the social context of measures intended to control the use of addictive substances, in which the use of alcohol, which poses a greater danger in both health and social terms, is not only tolerated, but often socially approved of.

**KEY WORDS:** ALCOHOL – CANNABIS – CRIME – MEDIA DISCOURSE – NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

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